

Emotion: it's tough.

From the blog series by [Jordan McCollum](#)



Photo by [Peter Dutton](#)

Writing emotion in fiction is hard—but it's so worth it.

Read on to discover the hows & whys of writing emotion.

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Let's get emotional

It's time for another series! I've been pondering this one for a long time because **emotion is vital to fiction**. We know that most readers read for an experience. New circumstances and exotic settings do give our readers an experience. But to truly immerse them in our characters stories, **we need emotion**.

But, just like in real life, **emotion in fiction is tough**. It requires just the right touch to know when and how to put it in, a fine balance to know when to leave it out, creativity to avoid clichés and reaching deep within ourselves for authenticity—possibly even exposing some of our hidden inner lives to the entire world.

It's easy to rely on clichés, to tell what the character's emotion is, to underwrite to the point of apparent sociopathy or overwrite to the point of purple prose. But easy writing is seldom powerful writing, and seldom powerful reading. **To really reach (and hook!) our readers, we have to get to their emotions**. So read on for more about effectively creating characters' emotions!



Photo by [Peter Dutton](#)

Why emotion?

In the summer of 2010, after I had baby #3, I went on a reading spree. I read a lot of great books, but after more than a month of devouring award-winning (and not so much) novels, I hit the wall. In less than a week, I started a bunch of books that just didn't reel me in.

Reading them was, frankly, a chore.

I did skip to the end of the novels, but largely so I'd never, ever be tempted to pick them up again. (If your novel makes sense without the middle 100 pages, something might be wrong...) Telling vs. showing was the main problem. I said it was like **the author was standing in front of me, holding up a curtain as he dictated the action on the other side**.



Although bad writing is always a turn off, it's not always enough to make me give up on a book, or at least half of it. Some of the books I just couldn't *not* put down lost me in [character soup](#). Ten characters

in the first five pages is way too many—especially when for some reason, we have to dip into each character’s POV for a paragraph or two, even if that character *is 2000 miles away and not having a scene of her own!* In another case, the story was told from one character’s POV, but by the end of the first chapter, **we’d met so many people I couldn’t remember which character that was**. And I kept forgetting in subsequent chapters.

I think both of these issues stem from the same problem: **a failure to get the reader (me) involved in the characters**. Something about the narration style (telling) was too distant or confusing for me to make an emotional connection and [sympathize with characters](#). And I’m realizing that **life’s too short for boring books** (or boring novels, anyway), so I’m not willing to persevere through a hundred pages to see if I suddenly start liking a character. No, I don’t believe characters have to be likeable to be sympathetic—but man, they have to **inspire me to feel something!**

What do you think? Why is emotion so important in writing? What keeps you from relating to a character?

Photo by [Wade Kelly](#)

Emotion: how we get in our readers’ hearts

Emotion is vital to fiction. Without emotion, our books can read like bad history textbooks: a log of who did what, where, and when. Some history stories are moving enough to catch our imagination, but those are rare.

If we want our readers to care about our stories—our *characters*—**we have to grab our readers (and our characters) by the emotions**.

This is something I’ve had to work hard on in my fiction. I’ve usually run under the assumption that my readers could *infer* how my character felt. Until I got that dreaded feedback: **“This scene drags. It’s boring.”**

Boring? Boring?! I thought. Can’t you see the emotional turmoil she must be in? The moral dilemma this puts her in?

Um, no, they couldn’t—**because I didn’t put it in there**. For all they could tell, the character didn’t care. She was impassively watching the scene unfold, or participating without any trouble. Setting up a situation just isn’t enough: you have to **show how that situation affects the character as it unfolds**, or we’ll have to assume it’s not.

Compare:

Andrica grabbed the rope with both hands. She stared at the ground thirty feet below her. Her palms slipped a little.

She looked up. Above her, footsteps echoed across the rooftop she’d jumped from. They were going to come after her any minute.

But she could get out of this. She had to. She just needed to think.

No, she needed to act.

She's in a pretty precarious situation—**but do we really care about the outcome?**

Andrica grabbed the rope with both hands. Her heart beat in her throat, but the thrill of triumph quickly faded. She dared to peek at the ground below. It should have been only thirty feet down, but her vision swirled dizzily. Her stomach plummeted and her clammy palms slipped a fraction of an inch.

She willed herself to look up. Above her, footsteps echoed across the rooftop she'd jumped from. They were going to come after her any minute. Adrenaline sang in her veins, making coherent thought impossible.

But she could get out of this. This time, she had to. Andrica forced a deep breath into her lungs. She just needed to think.

No, Aryn needed her—he needed his mother. She had to act. Now.

Now, not only do we watch what she experiences, but we know what she feels. **And if the author does it right, we feel what she feels.** And *that's* the way to creating powerful characters and stories.



What do you think? How do you like your emotion in fiction?

Photo by [Steve Ventress](#)

Don't tell me how you feel: showing emotions

The major pitfall most of us face when writing emotions is falling into the trap of telling. But **to engage our readers, simply stating “she was scared” or “he was angry” isn't going to suffice.**

This is just another example of one of those old writing rules that are vastly oversimplified: [show, don't tell](#). But this time, the rule rings true. Take this example from [Flogging the Quill](#):

The scene: Anna is beat from a long, bad day at work and now she's spent hours at the hospital with her father, who has been unconscious for days. You want to give the reader Anna's physical and emotional condition. This author wrote:

Anna was physically and mentally exhausted.

Sure, you get information. You have an intellectual understanding of her condition. But you have no *feeling* for what Anna feels like, do you? To show that Anna is physically and mentally exhausted, you could write this:



All Anna wanted to do was crawl into bed and go to sleep. But first she would cry. She didn't think she could be calm and composed for another minute.

Here, the example relies on **getting deep into the character's thoughts**. Personally, I think we should be on this level with the character a lot of the time. That [level of access to the character's thoughts and feelings](#) draws the reader in.

Another technique is to use **action** (to use another FtQ example):

Telling: He stabbed the man furiously.

See how an adverb tells rather than shows?

Showing: He plunged the dagger into the man's chest again and again and again, screaming "Die!" each time the blade stabbed into flesh.

Notice that this example **doesn't name the emotion**. Can you tell what it is? Of course! Would using the word "anger" help? Probably not. As parents, we're often taught that if we teach our children to name their emotions, it helps them to recognize and control them, taking the power out of the emotion. The same holds true in writing—naming the emotion can undercut its power (and thanks to my cousin Myrle for pointing that out!).

Another option is showing with the cliché, of course, but that's hardly any better than telling. Clichés, automatic turns of phrase like "his blood boiled," are used so often they don't carry much meaning anymore. Even [gestures can become cliché](#). Work harder—**change it up and make it fresh instead of giving your readers something to gloss over**.

What do you think? How have you used characters' thoughts or actions to convey their emotions?

Photo by [Daniel James](#)

Make a scene: show your characters emotions II

I have to be honest. The resource that really revealed this whole idea to me was part of Kaye Dacus's [showing vs. telling series, on feelings](#). And to give credit where credit is due, I'll also be using one of her examples on these two techniques to show characters' emotions.

The first method is possibly the most powerful way to show a character's emotion:

Fear ran down Molly's spine like a hundred tiny mice with cold feet.

That's right: **figurative language like metaphors and similes**. Can't you just feel that spine tingling? Figurative language is the best way to show an emotion. The imagery here can be so vivid that you might be able to get away without the name of the emotion at all.



This figurative language can be even more powerful and draw reader into the story and the characters even more when we work hard to [use language specific to our character](#). Your MC is a veterinarian? Maybe she thinks of fear like an animal backed into a corner, and describes each of her actions and responses that way (arching her back, snarling, barking, etc.). Or maybe

he's a veteran—he sees the world divided along battle lines, can't shake the memories of those he's lost, or is just ready for all this fighting to be over.

Finally, in Margie Lawson's [Empowering Character Emotions](#) course (and her EDITS system), she has a special classification for an **involuntary physical response to an emotional situation—the most powerful type of emotional response**. Things like sweating, blushing, skin tingling, and other responses to extreme emotion pack a powerful punch.

These methods of showing character emotions are a little more advanced and work best in tandem. But these are the most vivid methods, the most individual, and the best to illustrate the feelings and the character. But they should still be **used in moderation—especially involuntary physical responses and similes/metaphors**. Too many, even if they're all spot-on, can really distract the reader.

Of course, this is all easier said than done. Showing character emotions in a unique and engaging way is a pretty big challenge, no matter how many times you've done it before. (Actually, I might argue it gets harder over time, since you continually have to fish for new ideas so you won't repeat yourself.) So, seriously, **don't pressure yourself to get this all right on the first try, or even the first draft**. Human emotions are tricky things—and in writing, we should be grateful we get multiple attempts to get them right!

What do you think? How else can you show a character's emotion? What are your

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favorite methods?

Photo by [Bobby Acree](#)

Emotion: less isn't always more

You might not be able to tell so far from this series, but I've actually long been a proponent of the "less is more" school of writing, especially when it comes to emotion. Unfortunately, as I've [learned the hard way](#), **sometimes less is just less. Not enough.**

Different readers like different styles, and expectations vary by genre. But, handled well, emotion can enhance any dramatic scene. Sometimes we *do* need to avoid putting too much emotion in to give the reader room to feel, too. Other times, it's **more important to show the reader that the character cares and struggles, so they should, too.**



I think we're all used to seeing the sin of too much emotion in writing. But [not enough emotion](#) is probably just as common a problem, and even trickier to diagnose. It's good—vital, even—to leave room for our readers to feel, too, and to avoid melodrama. But if our characters don't feel anything on the page, the readers are left to wonder whether they are supposed to fill in all the blanks (and if so, how, exactly?), or whether they're just blanks.

Writing "she felt sad" or "he was scared" isn't going to cut it. We want our readers to feel what our characters feel, and characters—*people*—**experience emotion physically.**

Our emotions engage our bodies. Even emotional clichés convey this: we see red, our blood boils, we get butterflies in our stomach. To get to our readers' emotions, we do need to go through our characters' emotions. As I've said before, we want our readers to experience these emotions right along with our characters. **Techniques like the [figurative language we discuss above](#), when focused on physical reactions to emotions, almost bypass a reader's thoughts, evoking similar physical responses from the reader.**

That's why they're so powerful—and why we have to be careful to use them judiciously. We still have to be careful to make sure we don't overdo it—we'll be talking more about that this week—but at the least, I think we need a little physical response to the emotional stimulus in any scene where we want the readers to know this *matters* to our character (and, by extension, them).

What do you think? How do you convey physical emotion?

Photo by [René van Belzen](#)

Too much emotion: the other extreme

When it comes to writing emotion (just like everything else in writing!), we each face our own challenges. I tend to leave it out too much—but **putting too much emotion in can be just as deadly to our writing** (or even more so, since it can be an even more obvious problem for readers). This is especially true in highly emotional scenes. I think we've all heard the adage, "If the character cries, the reader doesn't have to" (or something like that).

This reminds me of a scene in a recent episode of one of my favorite TV shows. Two characters (whom we've just met) discovered the niece they've loved and raised has drowned. When they view her body, they bawl.



And they bawl.

And they bawl. (And this is a comedy!)

At the opening of the scene, knowing what they'll find, I was on the verge of tears myself. (I'm a mother, and for once I didn't resent the emotional manipulation.) But after what felt like *several minutes* (though it was probably only one) of watching these people cry, **my feelings changed from deep sympathy to alarm**. "Why are we still watching them cry?!" I asked my husband. "This is torture!"

Don't torture your readers! Too much emotion can pull your reader out of the story. It may be overwrought or melodramatic, or perhaps it [trips your readers' sensitive emotional shutoff valve](#) (exactly what happened when I watched that show—and the joke that followed wasn't quite as funny as I think they hoped).

How can you **avoid using *too much emotion***? We need to know when and how to portray emotion to make sure we don't turn our readers off.

Set it up in advance

Don't just drop an emotional scene out of nowhere, without giving the readers some frame of reference. Foreshadow. Set it up. Give us a chance to find out how the character feels about others in the scene or the general situation or similar events, etc. *Then* it's safe to let the reader feel along with the character with a lot less emotion words. As [author/editor Alicia Rasley says](#):

I suspect "less is more" really works here; most of the scenes that bring me to tears are underwritten, without emotion words.

But these passages are usually at the end of an emotional set up— that is, the author sets up the emotional situation so that I know what the stakes are, and then there's the moment of emotional release.

Even then, though, there's a fine line between subtle and just plain underdone.

Make it clear in the scene, but don't beat us over the head with it!

Using [common gestures](#) probably won't make it perfectly clear (unless you're going for a common emotion—and then, dig deeper). We don't need to be reminded every five lines, and we don't need paragraphs about the feelings, but *do* make sure it's there.

Use emotional imagery, especially something physical in the setting or props

Going along with the [physical sensation of emotions](#), physical objects in the setting—whether scenery or props—can imbue even more meaning and resonance into a scene, as editor/author [Alicia Rasley points out](#):

We really do endow things with emotional significance (wedding ring!), so that works better for me than emotion WORDS, which are necessarily a step removed.

Know when to put it in, and when not to

A number of factors influence this. One of them is *pacing*: if the scene is fast-paced and the emotional beat is short, don't delve too deeply into it. (*Gasp!* You could even get away with telling!)

Get feedback

Probably the most important step here: get some objective eyes on it!

What do you think? How do you tell whether your emotion is overdoing it?

Image totally lifted from Wikipedia. Fair use FTW.

Contradicting emotions



This is text the same shade of yellow throughout this image. But sometimes it's harder to read. Sometimes, it's easier. It's the contrast that makes the difference.

When we're crafting our characters' emotions, we want to strive for consistency. Our characters are going to look fickle, insecure or flat-out crazy if it seems like they're playing "he loves me, he loves me not" in every scene. However, while we want to make sure we preserve the [causality chain of emotional responses](#), **if our characters just play the single note of "love" or "fear," well, that's the definition of "monotonous."**

So we can't just show our character as "in love" or "afraid" all the time—even highly suspenseful or romantic scenes will tend to lose their power when strung together *ad nauseam*.

By incorporating other emotions—even contradictory ones occasionally—we enable our

characters to come to life, throw their “main” emotions into relief, and show the many facets of human emotion.

Author Brandilyn Collins calls these “main” emotions *passions* in her book [Getting into Character: Seven Secrets a Novelist Can Learn from Actors](#). She bases her secrets on the methods of acting guru Konstantin Stanislavsky.

On passions, she writes (emphasis mine):

Stanislavsky likens a human passion to a necklace of beads. Standing back from the necklace, you might think it appears to have a yellow cast or a green or red one. But come closer, and you can see all the tiny beads that create that overall appearance. If the necklace appears yellow, many beads will be yellow, but in various shades. And a few may be green or blue or even black. In the same way, human passions are made up of many smaller and varied feelings—sometimes even contradictory feelings—that together form the “cast” or color of a certain passion. **So, if you want to portray a passion to its utmost, you must focus not on the passion itself, but on its varied components.** (95)

So by using different aspects of these passions, we can better illustrate the real depth of feeling a person would experience. Instead of constantly hitting the same emotional cues in every single scene, we can change up some of the emotions to explore the real depths of the feeling. And every once in a while, we can even take a break from that passion—dropping a low-tension scene every once in a while to make the high-tension scenes stand out.

What do you think? What are the components of the passions you tend to write most?

Hit me with your best shot: emotional turning points

We’ve briefly mentioned that you have to suit the portrayal of the emotion to fit the pacing of the scene. Sometimes that means we can only afford a quick gesture, thought or even a tell. Other times, that means fully delving the depths of the emotion. So **which scenes deserve the biggest emotion, the fullest development?**

The short answer: **the emotional turning points.** Author/editor Alicia Rasley has a useful definition of [turning points](#):

Turning points are the major plot events that cause some big change and modify the trajectory of the characters in the plot. But the “turning” comes from the CHANGE. It’s not just a big dramatic event, it’s an event that “turns” from



what's come before. Yet, if you want a logical, coherent plot, you want that big turning event also growing out of what came before.

Our characters often get to do 180s in circumstances, attitudes and emotions. When these changes come quickly (in a single or short series of scenes), as Alicia says, we have to make sure that the turning event and reactions are organic. And when things change that quickly, we may have to do a lot **more emotional exploring so our readers can follow** the process instead of just getting jolted from one extreme to another.

For our readers to appreciate the full extent of the change, we also have to set up or establish the beginning point very well. As Alicia says:

Think of the turning point as the culmination of something. Then set up for that in earlier scenes. Then the turning point will have something to turn FROM. It will be a pivot point from one situation to another.

Sometimes the effects of an emotional turning point will be obvious. But most of the time, **we can't jump from fear to anger or joy to despair without showing at least a little of the thought and emotional process.** We have to show the turning so that our readers can experience the full emotional journey.

What do you think? What are your favorite emotional turning points? How are they set up? How are they portrayed?

Photo by [Stacy Lynn Baum](#)

Getting through emotions

A version of this post was originally posted as part of the [character arcs series](#).

Emotions are important in fiction and can be hard to get right. After [highly emotional scenes](#), for me, the next most difficult type of emotion to convey is multiple emotions in a single scene. Although [most passions are composed of multiple emotions](#), we typically don't experience, say, love, ambivalence and annoyance all the same time. But sometimes we need our characters to.

Typically, these evolving emotions are easier to handle with constant stimuli/input to create these emotional reactions ([as in a scene](#)). It's more of a challenge in **a sequel: what comes after the scene—the emotional response**. However, the sequel also has a structure that can help with this kind of character arc.

In [Scene & Structure](#), Jack Bickham gives a structure for the sequel: **Emotion – Thought – Decision – Action** (which leads to another scene). The **Emotion** is the initial response to the events of the scene and its Disaster. When the character moves past the initial emotion, they think through the events, their response and their options in the **Thought** phase. This ultimately leads to a **Decision**, which takes the character to another **Action**.

Not all the steps of the sequel are necessary. In fact, the sequel itself might not be necessary—depends on the pacing and whether the emotional reaction constitutes a change. But **when the character is going through a major change, we can spend a little more time here**. And this is where we motivate the next action.

When an emotional change in the sequel follows the full steps of the sequence, we know that there's a logical progression of the events of the sequel. By moving through these steps, we can lead the characters and the readers through the steps of the change and create a compelling, convincing change.

For example, if we need our character to go from shocked after the last disaster to furious in the sequel, we **start with that initial emotional response**—the shock. We don't have to spend a long time exploring the shock, especially if that's the kind of reaction you'd expect in light of the disaster. Once we create a vivid picture of the shock (and that's a toughie, since it's characterized by the absence of feeling, really), we can give the character a minute to get her bearings again.



Once she's had some time to recover, she's ready for the Thought phase. Here we can **explore exactly why she's so surprised**—because, say, this revelation is something that the hero could have told her. It's something she would understand and would have even made her happy, if he had just told her, and he knew that—but he's chosen to lie to her about it the whole time they've known one another.

And that can lead us to the Decision. The Decision can be about the coming Action and set up the next scene—or **it can be a further decision about the emotional response**. You know what? He *should* have told her. How dare he not? And if he could lie about that, what else about their relationship was a lie?

And now she's mad.

What do you think? How have you handled drastic emotional changes in sequels?

Photo by [Dan Foy](#)

E is for Emotion!

Emotions keep coming up in everything I'm reading, it seems, and I don't know if I can say it any better than these guys.

I'm not alone in seeing emotions as vital for making an impact on readers:

I once critiqued a novel whose opening scene failed to draw me in to the protagonist's emotions. Yet all the other aspects of the scene were well done. . . . In reading the scene a second time, I realized what was missing. As this character

waited, he displayed very little sign of the inner rhythm he would have been experiencing at such a moment. There he was, after two years' meticulous planning, supposedly poised to spring into action. Numerous thoughts of what could go wrong were cycling through his head. Yet he just stood quietly waiting. No sign in his movements of fear, apprehension, the rush of adrenaline. No feel of his muscles tensing, shivering with the knowledge of action to come. And because he didn't exude it I didn't feel it even though the author informed me, through the character's thoughts of all possible mishaps, that I should. (Brandilyn Collins, *Getting into Character: Seven Secrets a Novelist Can Learn from Actors*, 121)

Emotions can improve almost any scene, and they can even make formerly boring scenes vital keepers:

Micro-tension has its basis not in story circumstances or in words: it comes from **emotions** and not just any old emotions but **conflicting emotions**. (Donald Maass, *The Fire in Fiction: Passion, Purpose and Techniques to Make Your Novel Great*, 190)

In reality, it is feelings, specifically feelings in conflict with each other, that fill up an otherwise dead span of story and bring it alive. (Donald Maass, *The Fire in Fiction: Passion, Purpose and Techniques to Make Your Novel Great*, 225)

I believe that **emotions are vital to writing**. They're not easy to convey well, to balance or to keep fresh—but they're at the heart of fiction. And you don't just have to take my word for it:

Novels are unique among art forms in their intimacy. They can take us inside a character's heart and mind right away. And that is where your readers want to be. Go there immediately. And when you do, show us what your hero is made of. If you accomplish that, then the job of winning us over is done. (Donald Maass, *The Fire in Fiction: Passion, Purpose and Techniques to Make Your Novel Great*, 32)

What is fiction about if not the true portrayal of human emotions? That is the goal authors should strive for most. (Brandilyn Collins, *Getting into Character: Seven Secrets a Novelist Can Learn from Actors*, 103)

What do you think? What's your favorite lesson about emotion in fiction?

Bonus Features

Okay, so that was the finale of the series on emotions. But there's always so much more to learn about getting emotions on the page! So here are some awesome resources, including quotes, articles, series, books, and even entire courses on writing emotions:

- [edittorrent: Don't undercut the drama](#)

- [The Bookshelf Muse: Description 911: Over Expressed Emotions](#)
- “The conflict of the earlier scene guides the emotion of the next scene. The reader will assume (rightly, of course) that the first event will have some effect on the characters, and that they will show that effect, even if they try to hide it, in the immediately succeeding scene.” — [edittorrent: Sequence and emotion](#)
- “Make the reader care by giving them a reason to care. Show your characters’ emotions to invoke a similar, sympathetic response in your readers. Up your characters’ emotional stakes by revealing what’s at stake in the plot. If you’re able to do this and get your reader invested in your character, they’ll become invested in the story. They’ll turn page after page not because you’ve written the next episode of Jack Bauer’s 24 and the entire world is going to end, but because they care about the characters.” — [* Fiction Groupie *: Guest Blog: Author Ashley March on Character Emotions](#)
- [Showing vs. Telling—Feeeeeeeeeeelings . . . « KayeDacus.com \(Series\)](#)
- “Don’t shorthand important emotional moments. Naming an emotion is probably the most common form of emotional shorthand. (She said angrily, he appeared baffled, she felt anxious, etc.) This is weak writing, though it’s appropriate for moments when you want to downplay the significance of a character’s reaction and move on quickly to other things.” — [Ask An Editor: Adding Emotion | Romance University](#)
- “Then came a suggestion that held the key to increasing tension: heighten the emotions of the point-of-view character. Even better, create conflicting emotions. Bingo. Suddenly the moment sprang to life. Both the interest level and uncertainty of the outcome spiraled up.” — [Writer Unboxed » It’s Not the Cougar](#)
- [Tribal writer: 5 ways to put more ‘soul’ into your writing](#)
- “Melodrama is when emotions, plot, or actions are too over the top. My litmus test is if a scene that is intended to be emotional/heartfelt/painful would tempt readers to groan, roll their eyes, or laugh, then I’ve crossed over the line.” — [* Fiction Groupie *: Oh no! Melodrama! — Avoiding the Reader Eye Roll](#)
- “This ‘emotional exposition’ scene shows a lack of confidence in the story! And this is something to watch out for in our own books. If we’ve done our job setting up and developing the character journey, and if we’ve created scenes that show the emotion, no one should ever have to state out loud the emotional revelation.” — [edittorrent: Emotional exposition.](#)
- [The Bookshelf Muse: Stocking Stuffers for Writers: Emotion](#)
- [Author Liz Talley – Pass Me a Tissue: How to Add Emotion to Your Writing |](#)

Romance University

- [Emotion without Sentiment](#) by Alicia Rasley
- [Emotion is Physical](#) by Alicia Rasley
- [Empowering Character Emotions course](#) by Margie Lawson
- [Getting into Character: Seven Secrets a Novelist Can Learn from Actors](#) by Brandilyn Collins
- [The Fire in Fiction: Passion, Purpose and Techniques to Make Your Novel Great](#) by Donald Maass

Emotion is how we get into our readers' hearts. Emotion can take our book from "well written" to "captivating." We read for an experience, and emotion is the best way to convey that experience. In fact, it *is* the experience.

So enjoy writing powerful emotion and captivating your readers' hearts!

Thank you for reading my free writing guide. I hope you enjoyed it!

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