

THE UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR OF STORY[®]

An Author's Guide to

WRITING FOR THE SOUL OF THE WORLD



Hazel Denhart, Ed.D.

ABOUT THE THEORY

The Universal Grammar of Story is the mythopoetic structure common to all story forms regardless of genre. It is based on four core pillars of storytelling rooted in the teachings and creative ideas of our literary ancestors as discovered by Hazel Denhart during many years of scholarly research. This is the 5th printing of the original book published in 2019 and remains the same except for a revised introduction and simplified table of contents.

Two supporting books and a game are also available to add to your enjoyment of this extraordinary work:

Universal Grammar of Story: The Workbook

Universal Grammar of Story: The Game Book

Universal Grammar of Story: The Complete Game

A forthcoming new series titled *Writing for the Soul of the World* will expand on the ideas of this book beginning with the first volume, *The Call to Write*.

The Universal Grammar of Story[®]



*An Author's Guide to
Writing for the Soul of the World*

Hazel Denhart, Ed.D.

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Keywords: mythopoetic writing; Jung; storytelling; mythology; depth-psychology; philosophy; sociology; linguistics; culture; fiction writing; nonfiction writing; call to write; creative writing; writing technique; writer's block; playwriting; dramatic writing; drama; screenwriting; criticism and theory; writing philosophy

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DEDICATION

For Rick,
Who gave voice to the disenfranchised,
Fed thousands in famine,
And vanquished terror's mask with an enchanting smile.
You are my champion,
My Kahn

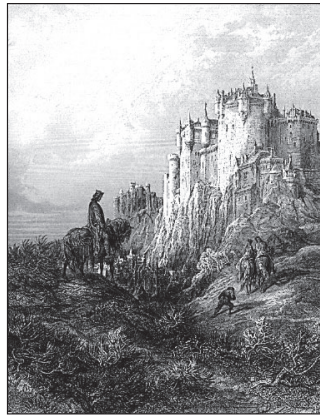
مَا شَاءَ اللَّهُ

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INTRODUCTION

In all chaos there is a cosmos, and in all disorder a secret order.
C.G. Jung, 1959



Down through a labyrinth of darkening memory, into the infinite within, we journey toward the center of our creativity with every story we set to type. Word by word we feel our way along inky black walls of fear and doubt, deep into the boundless cavern of the unconscious. There, the ancient archetypes—perfect forms of mother, father, elder—greet and enfold us into a family of existential phantoms. They beckon, we follow, into the impossible, straight through granite walls of compressed heartache, unfulfilled wishes, and fossilized tantrums. Our egos refuse. Our souls insist. And a fiery battle ensues. Out of the crackling embers rises the one we seek to guide our writing, our authentic self.

This is a book about transforming the world through characters in stories. It begins with the metamorphosis of the writer. The characters we command to transform through the story arc we design for them, turn, and watch us awaken through the telling, as if the dreamed become aware of the dreamer.

Schooled in modern life to forget what we intuitively understand, very few writers still know the ancient “grammar of storytelling.” This is not the detested lessons from elementary school, but a means to transform our mistakes, glories, shame, and indignities into something noble and nurturing for the greater world. You innately know this method and philosophy of writing but have forgotten. It comes to us quite naturally in an alchemical ritual of gathering story elements, aligning them into the ancient form, infusing them with perennial wisdom, and sparking them to life with emotion, both cherished and reviled, from our personal and the collective memory. Drawing from Western history as well as my own story (childhood

marriage, illiteracy, discovery of intelligence, education, striking moments of enlightenment), I guide you back to the center of your storytelling power in the service of the greater world.

Society turns to stories as if to a form of “divination” where writers cast the runes of generational struggles in hopes of revealing a better path. Powerful stories move audiences to lift the world to places never felt before or rediscover ones tragically forgotten.

The Universal Grammar of Story (*The Grammar*) is mythopoetic writing, not a genre but a method and philosophy built on four pillars: (1) story structure and logic; (2) language, how some words empower while others weaken us; (3) unconscious drives of the writer and audience; and (4) how mythology and mystical philosophy naturally move through stories.

There are simple elements within these pillars that are easy to understand and can be immediately applied such as changes made in your everyday speech to radically alter your writing. Another simple element is the basic story structure distinguishing it from a report, diary entry, or newspaper article.

Other aspects of The Grammar are more challenging, such as the choosing of a seemingly simple word—the principal adjective driving a character’s arc. Other difficulties, surprises, or perhaps “shocks,” come when some minor character has fooled you into thinking they are the central character, thus derailing the movement and stealing the story’s energy. This is a case of “character block” and is the point where we, like August Wilson, begin arguing out loud with characters no one else can see.

This book and the series to follow titled *Writing for the Soul of the World* is your literary inheritance. Destiny calls you with this ancient knowledge to guide society along the uncharted edges of the social frontier with stories worthy of carrying wisdom from generations past to those long yet to come.

The ancients built great societies on great stories. They respected and educated their storytellers, nurturing them with the crucial resources necessary for their craft. They also recognized that humanity’s intellectual growth depended on wisdom earned through the struggle to understand. In ancient Greek academies “students of grammar” were taught to weave philosophy, language, culture, and spirituality into transformational stories with the power to shape and guide their people. They recognized that all things, be they physical, psychological, or intellectual move according to the same

pattern: disequilibrium—calamity—upheaval—failure—reconfiguration—evolution. Survival, real or fictional, depends on recognizing and accepting initial “failure” to be reconfigured into success.

However, in our time, failure is seen as a dead end to be avoided. Yet, no writer can avoid it because as the axiom goes, *there is no writing, only rewriting*. A good story often fails at least eight or ten times (realistically, more like 15-20) until at last the final draft emerges far grander than what we originally imagined.

In the Middle Ages, the reverence for educating storytellers sharply declined with the beginning of universities when studying grammar meant grooming the elite rather than shaping philosophers into storytellers. Being conducted in Latin, not understood outside university walls, led to suspicion that students of grammar were practicing the forces of “dark arts” and “secret doctrines.” However, by the 20th century, society had accepted scientific sensibilities dismissing mysticism as absurd.

The Universal Grammar of Story brings back your “magical,” “secret doctrine.” Storytelling literally is magic, the art of conjuring a spell. We “spell” words to write stories that in turn hold the listener spellbound. An important part of The Grammar is choosing which words to spell out. It is also most definitely “secret,” not because of any effort to keep it so rather, because it takes effort to understand it—the struggle the ancient Greeks knew we needed. In 1840, Søren Kierkegaard warned that the average westerner was no longer willing to struggle to understand and instead turned to computational devices to think for them. But writers are not average. We are in fact willing to think, to struggle.

If you crave to write, you are a writer. It’s that simple. There are no prerequisites. Writing is not a choice to be made. It is a destiny to be carried out. So, claim it. There are no timelines or milestones to achieve before declaring your love of the written word. It makes no difference whether you have been writing for years to critical acclaim or if in your elder years you are just now setting your first story to the blank page. Most writers secretly live the Secret Life of Walter Mitty, daydreaming story fragments and craving to weave those wispy fantasies into fables.

After decades of teaching thousands of students, I have learned to tell a native-born writer from a nonwriter well before they scribble their first story across the page. Writers will almost always ask,

“How do I know if I really am a writer?” And “When can I call

myself a writer?” Nonwriters rarely get that far. When realizing that the average story demands ten revisions, meaning a 350-page novel requires 3,500 pages of typing, nonwriters will leverage their time and talent by hiring a ghost writer to suffer in proxy. Writers, on the other hand, are willing to endure years of creative loneliness until at last the Sisyphean spell is broken and a moment of creative triumph arrives with the completion of a manuscript. Euphoria momentarily overtakes the past suffering and mercifully prepares us for that yet to come with inevitable, constant rejections, often 100 for every tepid show of interest.

In the face of suffering we keep writing because we see what the world cannot yet understand and bring to life what is desperately needed. Writers are visionaries.

Yet, at some point, you, like me and most other native-born writers, have sworn off writing forever. Again and again. But always some tantalizing glimmer of a story comes seducing and without realizing it, there we are, typing away, caught in the spell of casting spells. Nonwriters do not go through that level of suffering.

Another mark of the born writer is a compulsion to daydream. A lot. I was the kid always staring out the window at school lost in imagination. Even now, in the middle of a conversation, I suddenly realize that I don't know what the other person has said over the past four or five minutes because of my drifting away in thought. Daydreaming is the single most important characteristic of a writer. Spontaneous daydreaming is necessary and healthy, for this is how the archetypes speak to us.

Money, a career, and fame are the occasional fringe benefits of a few writers, but they are not why we write. Come wealth or poverty, fame or obscurity, sickness and in health we write because destiny unsympathetically commands us to write. Even when an insistent coquettish tale refuses to cooperate in the telling.

Your struggle is half the potential of great stories. The world's suffering is the other half.

ORIGINS OF THE UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR OF STORY

The Grammar was born out of my research for a master's thesis in 1990s. It was to be a simple analysis and comparison of Joseph Campbell's work on the hero's journey through the lens of other an-



cient and modern works on storytelling. Like an archaeologist, I dug into stacks of dusty books, slowly unearthing fragments lost to time that when pieced together revealed an ancient codex on writing. But it did not come easily.

I came into university life embarrassed of knowing nothing of Western civilization or the classics. I was a late bloomer, having not achieved literacy until I was nearly 30. Before then, I yearned to visit libraries but feared if I did someone would know I couldn't read and throw me out. Yet, I

wanted to be near those books, to touch them, to smell them. Then, after literacy, what had been a barrier—being born with a profound visual perceptual disability compounded by dyslexia—revealed itself as a gift. I could see things that others with a regular education could not. Everything in education was new to me. I couldn't wait to open books and be welcomed within their worlds. I treasured books that others were using for doorstops and coffee table levelers.

As I plowed into stacks of books on philosophy, creativity, storytelling, psychiatry, and even neuroscience, the authors seemed to be talking directly to me. I conversed with Heraclitus, Aristotle, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Jung. They directed me to dig out works buried in obscurity, like that of Edward Price who opened the first playwrighting school in the United States in the 1800s. I moved into the next century to Price's protégé Bernard Grebanier along with his contemporary (and likely mortal enemy) Lajos Egri. Then, I leaned toward the millennium and found a new wave of writing books where the heavy philosophy and demanding thought of the past gave way to the delightfully easeful reading of Syd Field's *Screenplay*, Gabriele Lusser Rico's *Writing the Natural Way*, Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones*, and Annie Lamont's *Bird by Bird*.

But what I needed was not in the modern world and so I returned to the distant past in search of more wisdom. I sought the firmament of Confucius, the Tao Te Ching, Bhagavad Gita, and Gnostic Gospels before moving forward again into the sparkle of Spinoza, the genius of Hegel, and the sharp wit of Kierkegaard. They are woven together in these pages along with Freud, a lover of writing and of writers. He knew the medicinal value of ancient Greek stories and drew on them, along with Jung, in developing the new field of psychiatry. It was in the pages of Jung where the fragments of my life and all I had ever read fused into a new form. As if I had been digging up stones in a forgotten ancestral village that reformed by themselves into a castle.

The formation of *The Grammar* took place in the remote desert of New Mexico where I took refuge from the Pacific Northwest rain to write. Two years later, I returned home and defended the work before my university thesis committee. Once approved and the degree conferred, the work had to be tested in the real world.

I taught *The Grammar* for several years at my home university while pursuing a doctorate. Then, I took it abroad and taught it to writers from starkly different cultures. My students were in Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. They were young and old, capitalists and communists, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Muslims, and those who confessed no belief. *The Grammar* worked across language, culture, and genre, in fiction and nonfiction, among screenwriters, novelists, biographers, short story writers, poets, lyricists, advertising copywriters, and even musical composers.

Now, it is ready for you.

You were born a writer. But like the athlete, your native talent requires discipline, dedication, and rigor to transform ordinary performance into extraordinary achievement. *The Grammar* serves as your mentor, coach, and trainer. It will not be an easy journey, but it will be a meaningful and powerful one transforming your writing. Like wild, unexpected love, a story will find its writer. The infatuation that follows is highly personal and resists even the most carefully engineered rules of order. There is no right way to approach the chaos and disorder of a story's messy and disorienting arrival. But once you feel its presence, as soon as it demands to be told, there is a right way to tell it.

Destiny has called you to be found by your story.

And so it begins...



PART ONE



THE CALL TO WRITE

The greatest sources of our suffering are the lies we tell ourselves.
Elvin Semrad¹



WE LIVE IN a world singularly obsessed with logic. Starting in kindergarten, a catechism of rationalism molds us into computational beings. Throughout our education we are driven to gather ever more information so as to fit into a society that is already severely information-overloaded. Save for the odd course in actors' training or Jungian psychology, institutional learning does little to sharpen our emotional intelligence. And completely missing from formal education is any legitimate training to advance our intuitive capacity—which is not even acknowledged to exist.

Creativity does not come through logic. It comes through intuition. Powerful emotions then cast its raw material into a vessel for unresolved anguish and shape it into artistic form. Insofar as logic enters the process it arrives last, like the engineering firm tasked with determining the structural integrity of what it has been handed by nature.

It is through intuition that three primal forces call us to write—one personal, one social, and one from the realm of myth and mystery. To recognize these forces and harness their energy we must first understand what they are and why they call us.

The *personal call* to write lures us into a story to wrestle with unfinished business in our own psychology. Here a private inner force taunts us with secrets so tightly held that not even the writer knows exactly what they are or why they have come.

Yet we are also drawn to write by a *social call* which drafts us into the archetype of artist to spin a single thread of our generation's collective dream. Millions of artists each contribute their thread to the grand tapestry of our generational struggle by depicting our society in all its shame and glory.

The *mythological call* to write beckons us through a mysterious

primal drive, carrying us beyond our private selves or even our sense of the collective. It compels us to reach for the unreachable in order to discover something far greater, nobler, and more meaningful than any identity we might claim.

These three primal forces call to us from out of the deep unconscious through the daydreams of stories. Like dreams by night, they carry symbols into the conscious mind to be encountered and deciphered through the labyrinth of myth.

The next three chapters sharpen our attention to the “call to write.”

1. In van der Kolk 2015, p. 11.



Chapter One

The Personal Call

I WILL NEVER FORGET the moment when I first realized I had exposed myself to the world through a play.

Baikal was my second play, produced by a small theatre company in Portland, Oregon. A newspaper article about a sixteen-year-old girl inspired the story.

Nestled into Portland's surrounding farm country is a tight-knit Russian Orthodox community of Old Believers. Their ancestors had left Siberia one hundred years before, outrunning religious persecution by the czar. Even over the course of a century, the community had not integrated into American culture. They remain apart, speaking and dressing like Russians in the wilds of Siberia a century before. The girl in the article had become pregnant by an outsider and was ostracized.

My play takes place in 1973, during the Cold War between the US and the USSR. My main character, Katrina, is pregnant, tossed out of her community, and unable to function in modern-day America. Driven by desperation, she jumps onto a Russian grain freighter in Portland and asks for asylum. Her simple plan becomes horrifyingly complicated when an army of outraged diplomats descends on the ship to demand her return. The Russians refuse, and a media spectacle ensues. Since the Old Believers do not register their children's births, the Americans cannot prove her citizenship. Neither can the Russians prove her asylum status. The battle for possession of Katrina becomes a symbol of the bitterness between the US and the USSR and a wrenching emotional struggle about what it means to be a Russian or an American.

I never thought this could be *my* story. I'm of largely British Isles ancestry whose lineage grants me membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution. I was not from a farming family and was well into my thirties before I wrote *Baikal*.

Yet as I heard the lines spoken by the actors, I felt the whole world was hearing my story. In the postproduction audience discussion,

I fought a torrent of tears, trying to conceal the truth of my shameful past.

Baikal is a play about someone dislocated from an Old-World community who is disoriented in the contemporary world. That is very much my story. I was part of the first generation of a Kentucky clan to be born outside Appalachia. Although I lived in a city on the West Coast, the world inside my home was pure Kentucky in its faith, language, food, customs, and dynamics. Just as my Russian protagonist was kept from mingling with outsiders, I too was discouraged from making friends of non-relatives, in the tradition of my clan back east. My protagonist became pregnant, then exiled at sixteen—the same age I was when my mother’s mother led me into marriage to a man in his twenties. Katrina could not read or write English. Neither could I read the marriage license that my mother signed granting permission for the matrimony. In the moment she scribbled me away, I desperately wanted someone with diplomatic authority to descend upon the small party at the county clerk’s desk inside the courthouse and object to the sale of me. No one came. And no one ever would.



© Hazel Denhart

Hazel and Grandmother on
Wedding Day 1973.

As I wrote that play, the personal call to write taunted me with symbols masking real struggles. It was a deeply private attempt to resolve the agony of that ceremony buried long ago. Recognizing the psychological block triggering *Baikal* was challenging, since that experience was too painful to confront in the naked light of conscious reality. That, of course, is why stories come to us in dreamlike images, waiting patiently for the truth behind them to be discovered.

Not long after *Baikal* was produced, I recognized a similar personal call in the work of one of my students. Tevin (a pseudonym) set out to draft a screenplay about an unsympathetic man who abandons his wife and baby for life among his street gang. Tevin had once been a teenage gang member but left that life for higher moral ground after the birth of his own son.

Tevin's screenplay *Bloodlines* (also a pseudonym) seemingly wrote itself for about twenty-five pages before dragging and ultimately collapsing by page forty (a typical progression for screenwriters). Tevin was surprised when I asked him if his own father had abandoned him for a gang. Indeed, his father had. It grieved Tevin to learn that instead of adding vitality to his story, the villain he modeled after his father weighed the story down until it ground to a standstill in a puddle of lifeless melodrama. I challenged Tevin to see the villain as *himself*.

"I would *never* abandon my son!" he screamed.

"Then you can't write this story," I replied. In defiance of my prediction Tevin returned to his script. After several weeks of struggle he stopped coming to class.

But the story would not give up on him. It stalked him day and night. Tevin languished in the paralysis of writer's block, growing ever more desperate to tell the tale that would not reveal itself. Finally, he came back to class and sheepishly asked what to do. The answer was simple: He had to identify with his father.

"I can't," he said.

"What if your old gang's rival suddenly decided to menace you?" I asked. "What if your son was in danger because of your presence in the home?"

"I'd leave," he said. "But only to protect my son."

"You are one step closer."

"No closer!" he insisted. "My father didn't leave to protect me. He left because all he cared about was himself."

"But you can conceive of leaving," I said. Tevin did not appreciate my insight, nor did he appreciate his assignment for the next week—to contemplate what would make him leave his son.

On the following Saturday, in the space of a few seconds, Tevin's writer's block abruptly vanished when he was confronted with a devastating truth about himself. He was working in his front garden with his two-year-old son at his side when a passing car backfired. Mistaking the blast for a gunshot, Tevin dove under the porch. When he came to his senses he saw his son standing alone in the yard staring at him in confusion.

"He wasn't old enough to understand," Tevin said. "But I did. I left him alone in the worst possible circumstance. Now I know why my father left. He'd rather look bad than weak and stupid." Tevin had abandoned his son for only a few seconds while his own father

had abandoned him for an entire childhood. Even so, those few seconds were enough to change Tevin's writing, and his life.

Now with a compassionate eye for the villainous father in the story, Tevin returned to his screenplay which again seemed to write itself, gushing from his fingertips so fast he could hardly keep up with the words streaming into his mind.

Tevin's first attempt at the story had offered him a safe distance to pursue and slaughter his personal villain. This left him with little more than a child's angry crayon drawing rather than the commanding story that was trying to surface.

After his epiphany, Tevin's story transformed into an entity of its own and became fully realized, belonging now to itself rather than to the hurting inner child of its author.

Early work typically fails to get finished, published, or produced because it tends to be blindly and notoriously autobiographical with distorted villains and angelic heroes. Veteran writers look back upon their early work with humor and embarrassment, knowing that the more horrible a villain is, the more the writer has exposed a personal story.

Realistic stories, however deeply fictional and fantastical they might be, are ultimately about the pain of shattered relationships. Of course, it is not necessary, wise, or advisable to attempt to repair a destroyed or dangerous relationship in order to write a story inspired by its pain. Writing a powerfully believable story only requires the writer to understand the truth of that relationship and what the story is asking of that truth. In other words, writers need to see both sides of the story with equanimity.

The creative act asks the writer to let go of logic, receive intuition, and deeply feel emotion. In the Western world, we are so out of touch with our own emotional being that we struggle to even identify which feelings are coursing through us. The American poet Robert Bly lamented that most Westerners are "unable to distinguish or even find the words to discriminate between despair and



Getty Images

depression, irritation and anger or between sympathy and empathy.” Human emotion is too complex and varied to comprehend through logic alone. Scientific study of emotion cannot teach us how to develop our emotional intelligence to live full emotional lives, let alone orchestrate them to develop powerful characters.

It took Tevin a while to sort through his anger, grief, despair, and humiliation. Finally, he recognized through personal experience that it was *shame* he shared with his father. The melodramatic and brutally fierce villain in Tevin’s early draft gave way to a realistic and worthy villain crushed beneath masked shame. This element sparked the story to life and propelled it forward.

The dream images of story beckon us to untangle impossibly dense personal struggles. Because we are social creatures those struggles will inevitably involve others. To succeed in working through our inner turmoil we must be willing to see ourselves in all the good and bad characters in our story. Doing so will bring us the gift of doubt. Through doubt we grow weary of the stale narrative we have been projecting onto the world and open our minds to something truly new. In the *Practice of Zen*, C.C. Chang writes, “The greater the doubt, the greater the awakening; the smaller the doubt, the smaller the awakening. No doubt, no awakening.”¹

Although I saw myself in Katrina, the protagonist of *Baikal*, it took years before I could see myself in the play’s powerful sea captain or the communist party officer whom I had tagged as the villain. Like Katrina, these characters held secret messages for me from my own self. The captain was a metaphor for my growing power to navigate the world of literacy that I was beginning to command at the time I wrote the play. It was also a warning about how that power threatened to overwhelm me and cause me to lose my place in my clan. Likewise, the evil communist party officer reflected my family’s propaganda (which had followed me everywhere and infiltrated my every thought) with the mantra that my schooling was a waste of time and resources. In those moments when I succumbed to that way of thinking, I looked into a dark, horrifying future in which I foresaw that abandoning my education could cost me my life.

We write stories to send messages to ourselves. Sometimes they take years to reach us. We also write to awaken ourselves by using fictional villains to dispel the anguish of real ones. Yet, ultimately, a story is not a dream to be kept to oneself. The story uses our personal misery in the service of something greater. At some point we

must release our personal villains so that the villain in the story can serve the world by becoming fully human.

So it is that Oedipus is no more a personal tirade of Sophocles than Hamlet is a pouting rant of Shakespeare. Whether they were aware of it or not, these great writers successfully addressed the personal call once they released the characters from their own ego-centered daydream to be born into the greater consciousness of society.

1. Chang 1970, p. 23.



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