

***NOW WRITE! MYSTERIES* SAMPLE EXERCISE**

Plausibility

by Aileen G. Baron

What bothers me the most in mysteries, what jars me beyond tolerance, is finding something implausible, improbable, and unreasonably unlikely sticking out of the page and shrieking at me.

It's only fiction, you say. Sometimes, bestselling writers get away with destroying any hope of verisimilitude. Maybe they can, but you and I can't.

You have to know what you're doing. Early in the nineteenth century, two of the most famous American authors were Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper. Washington Irving used implausibility as a weapon, to create sharp humor and satire. Cooper, on the other hand, wrote adventure stories.

In his day, Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales were bestsellers; his characters were larger than life. As in many of today's thrillers, plot and characterization were based on the improbable. No one could have Natty Bumppo's extraordinarily sharp marksmanship and eyesight; no one could have Chingachgook's ability to track footprints underwater in a streambed.

In his delightful essay, "*Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences*," Mark Twain lists eighteen out of a possible nineteen literary offenses that Cooper committed in the space of two-thirds of a page in *The Deerslayer*. Among them was a requirement that, "*the personages of a tale shall confine themselves to possibilities and let miracles alone; or if they venture a miracle, the author must so plausibly set it forth as to make it look possible and reasonable.*"

Research and accurate observation are essential for plausibility. But, according to Twain, Cooper “*saw nearly all things through a glass eye, darkly.*”

Like the Leatherstocking Tales, certain types of thrillers depend on the implausible, in which if such and such happens, the world as we know it will end. Sometimes the assumptions are so preposterous that you want to strangle the author. That may be all right for these books, just a form of romantic escapism.

But in a well-crafted mystery, all must be plausible, or alarms go off in the reader’s mind. Especially in a key scene, the protagonist can’t suddenly come up with unexpected expertise at the last minute.

I ran into this in my book *The Gold of Thrace*. In the climatic scene, Tamar disarms her adversary by throwing a pot of paint at his hand. In order to make this believable and show that she could hurl an object that forcefully and accurately, I had to go back and create an earlier scene in which she saves a colleague from an attack of a venomous snake by throwing a rock at it. And to show how she developed that skill, I had to include a small flashback early in the book, showing her learning to pitch a baseball hard and fast, to compete with her brothers.

Try this technique in your own story.

EXERCISE

1. For your story, write a climatic scene in which the protagonist demonstrates a unique ability or skill to overcome his or her adversary.
2. Now ratchet up the suspense. Have the protagonist fail at other attempts to defeat the adversary. Make the adversary more formidable. Careful. Don’t overdo

this and make him or her a cartoon character. Bring in the particular skill of the protagonist at the last minute, just as disaster seems imminent.

3. Write an earlier scene, in which this same ability is used to a lesser extent to rescue an ally. Feather it into your story.

4. Write a short, one-paragraph flashback showing how and why the protagonist developed and honed this ability. How would you place this in the story? How would you go into and out of the flashback? What inspires the memory? An object? A scent? A chance remark?