

William Patrick  
Fairfield MFA

## **How Do I Figure This Out?**

*(Approaches and Concerns When Reading as a Writer)*

### *Mechanical*

Do we understand this author's words and sentences?  
Grammar (How does this author combine the parts of speech to communicate with us?)  
Syntax (sentence kinds, patterns, forms, and rhythms)  
Spelling, punctuation, typography  
Point of view (narrative distance, tone, etc.)  
Imagery (concrete sense details that help us create mental pictures, figurative language, or abstract language, jargon, slang, and clichés?)  
What are the other elements of this writer's style, and are they effective?

### *Structural*

Overall shape (novel, short story, poem, nonfiction, play, screenplay, essay, hybrid form, etc.)? Comparisons with my other reading experiences?  
Genre? And if so, which genre conventions are employed, and which are ignored?  
Organizing principles for paragraphs, sections, chapters, and book?  
Would making a chart of plots and sub-plots help (fiction, feature film, epic poem, etc.)?  
How are the narrative modes (action, description, dialogue, thoughts, exposition) used/balanced?  
Ratio of scene to summary? How well does that balance work to focus the story?

### *Conceptual*

What is compelling or entertaining here, and why?  
Is the information presented in a dynamic, understandable form? (Nonfiction essays, articles, books, etc.)  
Does this story feel fresh, or is it full of worn-out language and borrowed plot-lines?  
What's the narrator/reader relationship (P.O.V., distance, trust, unreliability, tone, etc.)  
Are the characters flat (two-dimensional) or round (we know their secrets!)? How has the author revealed them to us (description, motivation, believability, unique qualities)?  
Do we become emotionally involved with these characters? Do we care what happens to them?  
Plot (Arresting opening; scenes and sequences causally related; dramatic action; effective transitions; cliff-hanger page-turner or complex but engaging literary novel, etc.)?  
Has the author created a vivid, fictional dream-world and not interrupted it too often?  
Conflict -- Are the stakes high enough? Are the actions focused and significant?  
Setting -- Enough where and when to involve and situate the reader? Is it skillfully woven into the action or just shoved in your face?  
What has this author tried to make us experience, and did we experience those things?  
Theme -- What's it all about, Alfie?  
What seems true in this writing? Why does the author think it's significant, and do I agree?  
What worked here and what didn't?  
Do I like this or not, and why?

## First Two Pages of Submitted Manuscript

*Maps have proven to be a versatile medium through which to express our inquisitive nature and make sense of our physical world. ~Antonis Antoniou*

Every seven years a body's cells rearrange themselves in such a way that we no longer have a memory of those old cells – at the cellular level you can no longer remember the actual weight of the world you used to carry, the blade of a knife piercing through your flesh, or the feel of his hands on your skin. You are a fundamentally different person every seven years.

The human body is made up of approximately ten trillion cells. At their own pace, each cell divides, regenerates and dies. Except for the brain, the bones and the heart, a person's body renews itself repeatedly throughout one's lifetime.

*Within a singular visual, we are able to impose order by appropriating reality and its complex layers. It is an endeavor that emanates an intoxicating sense of power in harnessing knowledge...Maps make compelling promises. ... They grasp greater concepts, detect patterns, prognosticate, and reveal new layers of meaning. ... ~Antonis Antoniou*

The bones hold the history of the land. The fractures, hairlines, compound breaks.

The brain, the complicated road that creates and maintains memory, doesn't change, but because of plasticity, it is capable of creating different connections.

The heart. Well, one must just be soft and protective of her heart.

I have a scar in the center of my forehead I rarely notice. My entire body is covered in scars – I spent a significant amount of time throughout the last decade being

cut, tattooing my body with various scars from surgeries, frequently forgetting a fairly significant scar on the center of my face.

Shingles. I had a break out a few years ago. “A unicorn.” That’s what my friends called me at the time, as what appeared as a large zit poked its head out of my forehead. But then it grew, and a perfect line of crimson spots formed down the right side of my face.

I had gone out on a first date with a man named Scott at a place in Minneapolis called Psycho Suzi’s, a dive bar in my neighborhood that encourages its servers to be smoking hot and surly. The drinks come delivered in gaudy decorative tiki mugs you can take home for \$5 a piece, and the décor was reminiscent of an old aunt’s basement, orange and brown dim-lit chandeliers that hung from the ceiling. The bar was hoping to resemble a trailer park. With success.

Scott and I agreed to meet at the bar, despite the unicorn that grew out of my forehead. I caked the obtrusion with thick foundation and facial powder. I tried to keep it covered until it healed. We took a table outside on the blistering hot tiki patio. The afternoon wind was still and sweat rolled down the backs of my knees as Scott and I attempted awkward first date small talk: hobbies, superficial histories, hopes and dating desires. At some point in the date I decided to dab my forehead with my napkin to catch the sweat that started rolling down my face. In the process I unknowingly removed the entire block of skin where a scab had just begun to form. Scott didn’t mention anything. I didn’t tell him about shingles. We never went out on a second date.

## First Two Pages of Edited Manuscript

After two hours of waiting, I hear my name. It's time to change into a huge blue paper robe that will be plugged into a heater. Nurses wrap my legs in compression socks that squeeze each of them, preventing blood clots from forming during the surgery. I meet my anesthesiologist. His name is Martini. *Oh yes, indeed. Just give me drugs already. Just let me forget already. Feed me the sweet nectar. Take away my inhibitions. Make everything liquid and okay.*

Waiting. Waiting. Waiting some more.

"We're just waiting for the doctor," a nurse tells me as she pierces the IV into the top of my left hand. Dr. Martini comes back another time to see if the surgeon has arrived.

My mom sits in a chair to my right, scratching the back of my neck. "I'm so proud of you, honey," she says. I know my mom's desire to have me lose weight is not because she is ashamed of me – not that she has somehow failed me as a mother. She wants me to be healthy. I'm not sure, if she were the fat one, that she would make the same choice, but I can't even imagine her being as hungry as I am.

"Thanks," I manage to mumble, but I wish I could be more proud of myself.

I tilt my head to the left to help force my tears to roll down my left cheek instead of my right, so she can't see. Big girls don't cry.

11:30 a.m. comes and goes. The sterile silver clock on the wall ticks methodically. I recognize the delay between each second. Multiply. *Breathe*, I tell

myself. *Do not, under any circumstance, think about the probes, the tubes, the cuts, the rules, the new mysterious path food will need to learn in order to navigate my insides. Breathe. There is no knife. There is no hacking. Denial. Denial. No hacking. No scars. Breathe.*

Dr. Baker shows up eventually and says, “I am so sorry you’ve been waiting here so long.” There had been a conflict in his schedule. I have been lying in pre-op, connected to an IV, for almost two extra hours.

He looks over my ultrasound, then hands me a waiver to sign.

“Do you want a photo?” he asks.

“What?” I smile, imagining the Polaroid he would produce. This would be the kind of thing I could whip out at Thanksgiving dinner, “Hey, want to see pics of the guts of my house? We’re ripping up the plumbing, doing some major reconstruction...” I imagine how it will look on my mantel next to the wooden shoes my grandma gave me and candles whose wicks burn at varying lengths.

“We will be documenting the procedure with a camera. If you would like, I can show you a photo of your stomach.”

“Sure,” I say.

“You ready?” the nurse asks. She quickly unhooks me from the wall unit, unlocks the bed, wheels me toward the doors that lead to the operating room.

“Yeah.”

“Love you,” my mom tells me as she grips my right shoulder one last time. “See you when you get out.”

## **Noah Lukeman's Checklist for the First Five Pages**

*(Reading as an Agent)*

1. **Presentation** – Conform to the format standards of the publishing industry.
2. **Adjectives and Adverbs** – Be careful not to overuse or misuse these.
3. **Sound** – Pay close attention to the rhythms of your prose.
4. **Comparison** – Use similes, metaphors, and analogies properly and imaginatively.
5. **Style** – Avoid the archaic, the florid, the overly minimalist, the too academic, and other styles that push your work toward self-indulgence.
6. **Dialogue** – Use it sparingly, effectively, and at the right moment.
  - a. Don't ignore the importance of well-placed attribution.
  - b. Don't settle for spitfire dialogue – without pauses, breaks, and pacing.
  - c. Don't constantly interrupt your dialogue with modifiers or extended description.
  - d. Don't play journalist and drop in character quotes here and there.
  - e. Don't rely on commonplace, on-the-nose dialogue.
  - f. Don't insert "fake" dialogue as exposition or Hollywood melodrama.
  - g. Don't make dialogue hard to understand with dialects or scant attribution.
7. **Showing versus Telling** – Use actions and scenes to create immediacy and to characterize efficiently, but be selective about what you show. You can't dramatize everything.
8. **Viewpoint and Narration** – Choose your P.O.V. and narrative strategies carefully so you can avoid inconsistencies, create an authentic voice for your story, and establish trust with your reader.
9. **Characterization** – Try not to alienate your readers with poor characterization.
  - a. Don't use stock or overly exotic names, and don't switch often between first and last names.
  - b. Don't launch into the story without establishing any of the characters.
  - c. Don't settle for cliché character traits.
  - d. Don't introduce too many characters at once.
  - e. Don't present extraneous characters, or characters we don't care about.
  - f. Don't offer generic character descriptions.
  - g. Don't employ entirely unsympathetic protagonists.
10. **Hooks** – Find hooks that work not just as opening lines, but continue on into first paragraphs and first pages and first chapters.
11. **Subtlety** – Less is always more. Turn subtlety into proficiency.
12. **Tone** – Develop a tone that complements your sound and style and makes a reader feel comfortable.
13. **Focus** – Remember: No matter how good the writing, if it does not further the intention or progression of the work, it must be cut.
14. **Setting** – Employing it only when necessary is a big mistake. Find a way to feature it.
15. **Pacing and Progression** – Make sure your book reads at the proper pace, not too fast and not too slow. Include all the right ingredients in all the right amounts.