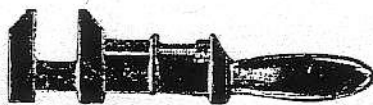


Illustrations: Clue® game equipment used with permission from Parker Brothers © 1972



Setting the Stage:



rors. This dimension of writing might seem trivial, but it's essential. It may seem easy, but try it sometime. More than a few would-be writers observe, "I never knew how difficult it would be to get everything started up."

Updike Is Rich—in Detail

A struggling writer seems to take forever to get a story going, while a great one, like John Updike, can set the stage without our even knowing it. Here's how Updike does it in *Rabbit Is Rich*:

Running out of gas, Rabbit Angstrom thinks as he stands behind the summer-dusty windows of the Springer Motor display room watching the traffic go by on Route 111, traffic somehow thin and scared compared to what it used to be. The . . . world is running out of gas. But they won't catch him, not yet, because there isn't a piece of junk on the road gets better mileage than his Toyotas, with lower service costs. Read *Consumer Reports*, April issue. That's all he has to tell people when they come in. And come in they do, the people out there are getting frantic, they know the great American ride is ending.

Instead of telling us about Rabbit, Updike lets Rabbit tell us about himself. While Rabbit privately gloats over his good fortune, we gather in a few essentials: Name? Rabbit Angstrom
Job? Toyota dealer at Springer Motors
Season of the year? Summer
World situation? A fuel crisis
Rabbit's reaction? Terrific!

by Robert S. Boone

Last month in "The Writer's Craft," you learned that to engage the reader, a writer may create the impression that something in the world of the story is slightly amiss. Being aware of such subtle suspense can instantly pull the savvy reader deep into the story. But while making these long-range plans, the writer must also figure out something far more pressing in order to get the story underway: "How do I set up my story? How can I get the pieces assembled? How can I establish basic identities for my characters? Who are the people? Where do they live? What do they do?" To solve these irksome problems, most writers, instead of making a statement from the outside, find a way to let the basics flow from within. They often accomplish this feat in the most ingeniously obvious ways: by using letters, press clippings, or even mir-

Why? He sells lots of Toyotas.

His new sales pitch? *Consumer Reports*

Later in the same paragraph, we find out that Rabbit lives in Pennsylvania and that the year is 1979. We also learn that

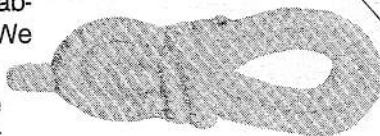
A hundred twelve units new and used moved in the first five months of 1979, with eight Corollas, five Coronas including a Luxury Edition Wagon, and that Celica. . . unloaded in these first three weeks of June already. . . .

Corollas, Coronas, and Celicas, of course, were real car models. And the fuel crisis was a real event that did take place in 1979. Pennsylvania is a real state. Rabbit may be a fictional character, but Updike has selected a real background for him, one that makes Rabbit's identity more accessible because Updike can rely on our knowledge of recent history.

John Updike and Agatha Christie



Photo: Courtesy Miranda Updike



To let us know about Rabbit's past, Updike uses another device. On the way back to his office from the front window, Rabbit must walk by cars, desks, salesmen, and customers. But it is only what surrounds Rabbit's office door that interests Updike:

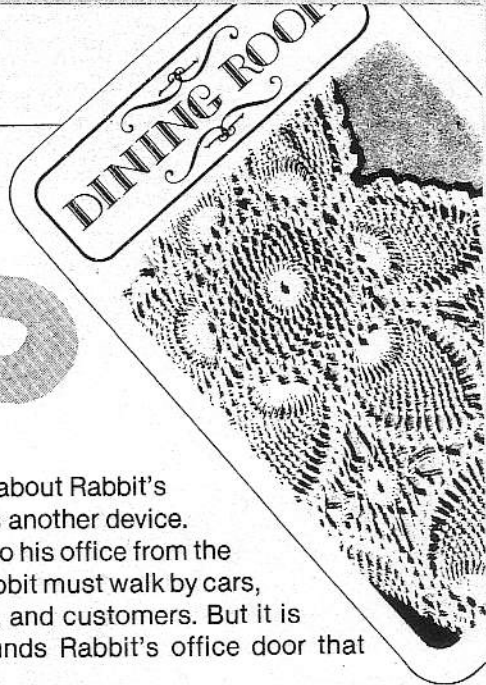
The wall of imitation boards, really sheets of random-grooved Masonite, around the door into his office is hung with framed old clippings and team portraits, including two all-county tens, from his days as a basketball hero twenty years ago—no, more than twenty years now.

The clippings are a sharp piece of realism, one that helps us picture Springer Motors. But this image is even more useful because it carries a significant clue to Rabbit's past and character. Updike has found a way to show us that Rabbit had been a high school basketball star. Updike plants this clue so that we can make the discovery for ourselves. Knowing this about the young Rabbit Angstrom helps us to understand the older one. We know, too, that the 1979 Rabbit clings to memories.

In *Rabbit Is Rich*, Updike creates a world in which we can immediately grasp the overall situation. While he makes us work to piece together the significant information about Rabbit, he does not hide anything from us.

In *The Poorhouse Fair*, using both dialogue and interior monologue, Updike once again fills us in, but he delays the clues so that it takes us a while to figure out who the people are, where they are, and what they're doing. *The Poorhouse Fair* starts off with two men, Hook and Gregg, discovering that someone has "fixed a metal tab" on each of the chairs that "lined the men's porch." An angered Gregg regards these name tags as the "birdbrain scheme" of someone named Conner. "Is he putting tags on us so we can be trucked off to the slaughterhouse?" But who is this Conner? And who are Hook and Gregg? And where are they? We can picture two featureless men scowling down at wicker chairs on a porch somewhere. Nothing more.

Then, by mixing dialogue with the thoughts of Hook, Updike gradually answers our questions: The



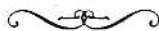


Photo: Courtesy Godfrey Argent

Hamborough Close,
Hamborough St. Mary,
Westshire

Station: Whimperley
Telegrams: Harborough St. John
M. Hercule Poirot,
Dear Sir,

A matter has arisen which requires handling with great delicacy and discretion. I have heard good accounts of you and have decided to entrust the matter to you. I have reason to believe that I am the victim of fraud, but for family reasons I do not wish to call in the police. I am taking certain measures of my own to deal with the business, but you must be prepared to come down here immediately on receipt of a telegram. I should be obliged if you will not answer this letter.

Yours faithfully,
Gervase Chevenix-Gore

In addition to unfurling the plot, this simple letter introduces characters. Those of us who have never heard of Poirot can infer from the reference to "good accounts" that he must be a detective of some renown. And we can surmise that the letter writer must be from a family of some standing, for he shuns the publicity that comes about by calling in the police.

To find out more about Gervase Chevenix-Gore, Poirot reaches for a "large, fat book" stuffed with facts about the rich and the prominent. Gervase Chevenix, Poirot reads, descended from a distinguished family, compiled a distinguished military record, and earned a distinguished education. He likes to travel and hunt big game. All this we learn while looking over Poirot's shoulder. Agatha Christie is nowhere to be seen.

Sometimes it is the setting, even more than the characters, that Christie must quickly establish. In *And Then There Were None*, she uses another device to acquaint us with Indian Island, the setting for most of this famous thriller. To provide a mini-history, Christie sticks us in the mind of the very first character we meet, a train passenger named Mr. Justice Wargrave, a man with powerful memory:

He went over in his mind all that had appeared in the papers about Indian Island. There had been its original purchase by an American millionaire who was crazy about yachting—and an account of the luxurious modern house he had built on this little island off the Devon coast. The unfortunate fact that the new third wife of the American millionaire was a bad sailor had led to the subsequent putting up of the house and island for sale.

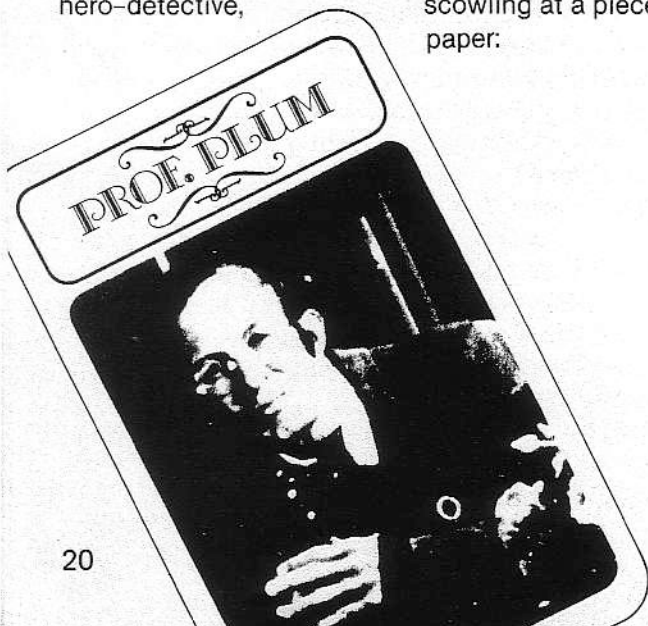
After the sale, Wargrave continues to recall, rumors flew as to who actually owned the place. Was it owned by "a Mr. Owen"? By a Hollywood film star named Gabrielle Turl? Was it an "abode for Royalty"? Was it owned by the Admiralty for "hush-hush experiments"? Whatever the ultimate truth, "Indian Island was news!"

chairs line the porch of a home for the aged. Hook is ninety-four while Gregg is "just seventy." Updike could tell us this right away, but he chooses not to. He could tell us directly, but he doesn't. He gives us the satisfaction of discovering something for ourselves.

Agatha Christie's Mysterious Techniques

Mystery writers, just like other novelists, must smuggle in the essentials. And few smuggle better than Agatha Christie. She, quite naturally, wants to get into the story quickly, because ultimately "Who done it?" is what really matters. Yet, like Updike, she must individualize her people and places. To do this, she uses many different gadgets.

In *Dead Man's Mirror*, Christie uses a letter and a reference book. Early on, we find Hercule Poirot, her hero-detective, scowling at a piece of paper.





Then, having been given an overview of this place, we find out why Mr. Justice Wargrave happens to be thinking about Indian Island.

From his pocket Mr. Justice Wargrave drew out a letter. The handwriting was practically illegible but words here and there stood out with unexpected clarity. *Dearest Lawrence. . . such years since I heard anything of you. . . must come to Indian Island. . . the most enchanting place. . . so much to talk over. . . old days. . . communion with Nature. . . bask in sunshine. . . 12:40 from Paddington. . . meet you at Oakbridge. . .*

The letter was signed by Lady Constance Culmington. Mr. Wargrave had not seen her for seven or eight years, since she had left for Italy. He recalls that she had traveled extensively to live with "Nature." She was, he concluded, "exactly the sort of woman who *would* buy an island and surround herself with mystery."

A few paragraphs later, Christie returns to a familiar device. In the "third-class carriage" of the same train, a young woman named Vera Claythorne re-reads a letter informing her that she has been hired to perform secretarial work at Indian Island. Like Mr. Justice Wargrave, whom she has never met, Vera is to be "met at Oakbridge station." But Lady Culmington is not mentioned; Vera is to be employed by a Una Nancy Owen. Thus the reader sees that something is not right. Christie allows us to know more than the characters; yet we come by this knowledge by bringing together information that they provide.

In *Elephants Can Remember*, Christie uses a mirror to bring the reader in touch with certain essential facts. Rather than telling us directly about a certain Mrs. Oliver, Christie gives insight into her by reporting what she sees and thinks when she looks at her own reflection.

The trouble with Mrs. Oliver was—and she admitted it freely—that her styles of hairdressing were always being changed. She had tried almost everything in turn.

After learning this quirk of Mrs. Oliver's, we see her in conversation with her servant, and this chat produces significant information. Through it we learn that Mrs. Oliver is going to a luncheon to give a talk before the "Famous writers of 1973—or whatever year it is we've got to now." What does Mrs. Oliver do? She's a mystery writer. How good is she? She's famous. With these facts established, the story is ready to unfold.

Whatever Kind of Writing You Do . . .

What can a high school writer of nonfiction learn from John Updike and Agatha Christie? What difference does it make that they know how to sneak in vi-

tal information so the reader can make important discoveries? One answer might be "no difference," for your job as an essayist is to make clear statements, not to challenge the reader.

Or *is* that your job? Even in the most straightforward paper, whether writing about a literary figure or about a historical issue, you cannot include everything. Thus, you must search for ways to make your reader see the big picture. When you are arguing a point, shouldn't your evidence speak for itself? Don't you want your readers, independently, to draw the same conclusions that you have drawn?

Also, as a writer, you should note the economy of language that Updike and Christie display in setting up their stories. If you are economical with money, you get the most out of your cash. If you are economical as a writer, you get the most out of your words. For Christie, a letter is more than a prop; it is a vehicle for introducing character. For Updike, a clipping on the wall is more than a realistic detail; it is a clue into a character's past.

And, for you, an introductory paragraph in an expository paper can be more than simply an introduction; it can attract attention, set a tone, and establish a relationship with the reader. Instead of simply making a topic sentence point the way, why not make sure it acts as a bridge between paragraphs? And rather than considering only the meaning of your words, why not select them with sound and economy in mind?

Further, if you do write fiction, the relevance of Christie and Updike is obvious. You can see that you share with these great writers the problem of setting the stage. □



Write Away

I. Write an opening paragraph in which you describe someone's clothes closet in such a way that we know not only the person's public self (profession, hobbies, and appearance, for example), but also his or her dreams and fears.

II. Apply the same strategy to describe an individual's car, backyard, contents of pocket, desk drawer, safety deposit box, hands, and anything else that might reveal a personality.

III. Construct an imaginary disagreement between two contrasting individuals. Consider sports, politics, or television as possible subjects. As you write the dialogue, find ways for the characters to reveal their general backgrounds. By the end of the debate, we should know a lot more about these people than they intended to reveal.