

## Five Great Storytelling Lessons from Harry Potter, Parts 1 & 2

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Principle One: Plant the seeds early, but plant them loosely and let them grow.

Principle Two: Chekov had a gun; Trelawney had a prophecy.

This week - and probably for weeks to come - everyone will be talking about The Boy Who Lived and his son, Albus, the main protagonist of the new addition to the Harry Potter series. In anticipation of the (unexpected) new addition, *Harry Potter and The Cursed Child*, I decided to re-read the entire series, all 3407 pages (in the Bloomsbury editions) spanning seven books. It's hard to believe it's been nineteen years since we first met Harry Potter, the wizard hero of J.K. Rowling's epic series. I found not just a captivating, imaginative story in the original novels, but lessons in great storytelling applicable to all writers who are creating novels of their own.

### Principle One: Plant the seeds early, but plant them loosely and let them grow.



"Young Sirius Black lent it to me," says the giant Hagrid on page 16 of the first book, as he gets off Sirius' flying motorbike with infant Harry. Who is Sirius? Rowling doesn't say, and he is not mentioned or seen again until the third book, when readers discover how important his role really is. The events of that first night are pivotal to the entire series, and Rowling must know she will come back to it time after time. It is to her credit that she doesn't give in to the temptation of so many debut novelists, who let their characters practically jump up and down and shout at the reader, "Pay attention to this detail! It will be important later!" Imagine if, instead of concentrating on the events happening in front of

them, she had stopped the action for Hagrid to explain. "Young Sirius Black lent it to me. You know, Harry's godfather, the renegade son of the old wizarding family who live in London. He looked very upset about what happened, but that makes sense. After all, he's been friends with Harry's parents since they were all students at Hogwarts together." The action would come to a screeching halt while the reader processes the history of a man they have not yet met.

**Instead she plants the seed** - Sirius was there when Hagrid found the baby-and moves on with the story, patiently waiting until events offer the opportunity to explore who this character is and why his presence is significant.

Patience is a hard lesson for writers, especially when we are introducing new characters, because we want our readers to understand as much as we do, and that includes character motivations and backstories. But in real life, we don't usually discover everything about our acquaintances the first time we meet them. Building a relationship involves the gradual art of uncovering experience and story. And one of the pleasures of reading is the gradual uncovering of layers, and the only way to experience that is if the writer holds some details back.

In your own Work In Progress, find a section where you introduce an important character - but not your protagonist - for the first time. How much information do you share with your reader right away? How did you decide what to leave out?

## Principle Two: Chekov had a gun; Trelawney had a prophecy.

Being patient and letting a story unfold does not mean that a writer should hold back major plot twists until the last minute. Within writing there is a literary technique called **Chekov's gun** – an element is introduced early in the story, but its significance does not become clear until later. "One must not put a loaded rifle on the stage if no one is thinking of firing it," he wrote.

There aren't many guns in Rowling's tales, but readers quickly learn that seemingly offhanded comments prepare readers for unexpected revelations. Hagrid's mentioning Sirius the night Harry's parents died prepares readers, almost without their noticing, for the inclusion of Sirius into the story later; they have already crossed a certain barrier of plausibility about his involvement because they have known for some time that he was there.

Similarly, at the end of *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry confides in his mentor, Professor Dumbledore, that he had a strange experience with Professor Trelawney, the Divination teacher whose ability to read the future is often in doubt. "Who'd have thought it?" says Dumbledore. "That brings her total of real predictions up to two. I should offer her a pay raise." And the conversation moves on.



It seems, at first, like a throwaway phrase, a dry way for Dumbledore to accept the prophecy without exciting an already worried Harry. Until two books later in the Order of the Phoenix, we learn that Professor Trelawney’s first genuine prediction was the event that pitted the villainous Lord Voldemort against Harry Potter. It’s a shocking plot twist, especially since her character comes across most often as a fraud. But readers will remember the seed planted by Dumbledore. “Why yes, we heard something

about this before. It all makes sense...” (Dumbledore is often the source of Rowling’s foreshadowing. Remember the Yule Ball in *The Goblet of Fire*, when Dumbledore chats amicably about how he was on his way to the bathroom when he stumbled across “a beautifully proportioned room I have never seen before, with a really rather magnificent collection of chamber pots”? That was the readers’ first introduction to the Room of Requirement.)

**What’s the right time for an author to drop in bits of foreshadowing like this?** According to Chekov, it must be done early. But the best hints are those made in natural places – when a character in conversation would have a reason to bring it up (like someone asking him, “Where did you get that flying motorbike?”), or someone would be in the right place to notice an object lying on the table, etc. Whatever will help the reader understand that this has been the plan all along, and it was right there in front of them.



Foreshadowed elements may come up naturally as you write a draft, but typically these are subtle clues planted during the revision process, once you have worked out the ultimate conclusion. Once you know what you are looking for (that the man in the diner is really your hero’s father, or that the killer is really the supposedly-dim-witted brother), go back through your story and look for places where the surprise might intersect with your story.

Do you have other favorite example of Chekov’s gun, either in the Harry Potter series or in another work of fiction you’ve read? Share them on our [Facebook page](#)! The more examples we have, the better we will be able to recognize it in our own works.



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