

**The First Two Pages of “Wrong Notes” by Andrew Taylor**  
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An Essay by Andrew Taylor

For me, writing a short story is fraught with uncertainty. I’ve written more than three dozen novels, and I’m comfortable with the process they require, though it’s never easy. But short stories are different. With a novel, I often don’t know the ending until I get there. With a short story, though, I need to have a good idea of the entire plot before I can start. There’s no room to hide in a short story. Every word must count.

Before I wrote a word of “Wrong Notes,” I had decisions to make. Would it be a one-off or would I link it in some way to one of my series of novels? A one-off, allowing me free rein to experiment, would have been so much easier. Instead I chose to connect this story to my Lydmouth Series. Lydmouth is a fictional town on the borders of England and Wales. The series is set during the 1950s. There are eight novels, the last of which was published fifteen years ago, but the place, the time, and the characters won’t leave me alone. In the interim I’ve written four short stories set there.

The decision had immediate consequences for the first two pages of “Wrong Notes.” On the one hand I had to cater for readers who, like me, enjoy revisiting Lydmouth’s inhabitants and their world. On the other, I had to bear in mind the sad truth that many of the story’s readers might not have come across the novels; in other

words, “Wrong Notes” had to work on its own terms as well as well as part of a series.

This is how the story opens:

“And what about the concert at the High School?” Amy Gwyn-Thomas asked.

“We’d better send someone,” Jill Francis said.

The first two pages take place in the offices of the *Lydmouth Gazette*, the local paper, and involve a conversation between Jill, the editor, who is one of the two protagonists of the series, and Amy, her secretary. The location and the two characters are instantly recognisable to those who already know the novels. They are talking about someone they refer to as the Cub.

I chose to begin with dialogue because, however mundane its content, it’s a childishly effective way to hook the readers’ attention. I can’t remember where I picked up this tip, but it works. Used sparingly and with care, dialogue breaks up the text on the first page, and its layout generates a natural dynamic. The reader’s eye skips from one speaker to the other in a manner that always reminds me of watching a tennis match: I find it almost physically impossible to avoid looking at the ball as it bounces to and fro over the net.

In this case, a good deal of information is filtered through the seemingly inconsequential chat between the two women. Fiction readers, by and large, don’t like everything laid out for them on a plate; they like to engage with the words on the page, to draw inferences from them, to inhabit them with their imaginations.

It’s an intentionally low-key opening. Too low-key, perhaps? Looking at it now, I wonder if I should have begun with the fire in the wastepaper basket that’s

mentioned a few paragraphs further down. (“He could have burned down the entire building,” says Amy.) But maybe that would have been too obvious.

Jill decides to send the Cub to cover the concert at the High School for the *Gazette*.

“He’s wondering about becoming a journalist after he’s done his National Service,” Jill said. “This will be good practice.” ...Somewhere in the building a telephone was ringing and a typewriter was spraying letters like bullets at unseen targets.

On this first page, as well as setting up the opening of the story and introducing key characters, I wanted to establish that we were in a newspaper office and that we were not in the present day. Hence the clues like the typewriter and National Service (the latter lasted until 1963 in the UK). These are all signposts that direct the reader to another time. Only at the end of the first page do I make this overt, when Amy tears a leaf from the desk calendar, revealing that it’s the 5 July, 1956.

The conversation about the Cub is an immediate and particular event, related as it happens. But conveying information by dialogue can seem mechanical if it goes on too long. On the second page, I decided to draw back to provide a straightforward summary of the information Jill has about the Cub, such as she might give a third party. I needed his details to be established in the reader’s mind at an early stage, and this was the most efficient way to do it.

The Cub’s name was Roderick Hanbridge. He had left his boarding school abruptly in the middle of last term after what Charlotte called “an incident”...

He is a young and very junior trainee reporter who has been forced to leave school early. His mother is a friend of the newspaper’s owner, Charlotte, which

suggests that his family inhabits a world where influential people routinely pull strings for their children.

“His mother tells me he’s learning shorthand already,  
Charlotte said. “So he’s obviously as keen as mustard.”

The shorthand will later prove significant. Note “as keen as mustard,” a phrase much more common in the 1950s than now. Dialogue can play a major part in establishing a sense of historical context, even with the relatively recent past.

In the third section, which begins towards the end of the second page, we are back to the fictional present and back to more dialogue. Three sections in two pages, using different ways for presenting information: this is intended to build momentum, though there’s always a danger of its confusing the reader. I hope the risk pays off here, but of course I’m not the best judge.

We are back with our junior reporter:

The Cub sauntered into the office at four minutes past twelve....  
Unlike most teenagers he seemed fully formed, rather than a work in progress.

The Cub is four minutes’ late but he’s not in a hurry. As we know, Jill has a job for him. But the secondary purpose of this section is that I want to establish, without shouting it from the rooftops, that the Cub is a presentable, confident boy who’s trying to do his best in this strange new world. His language, appearance, and bearing suggest, at least to British readers, that he has the advantages of an affluent upbringing, including an easy, pleasant confidence when talking to older people in authority over him.

What happens next? The story has another seventeen pages to go. I had its outline in my head at the start. But during the writing I needed to make literally dozens of micro-decisions about how the story could most effectively be filtered to the reader.

The first two pages are only the beginning.

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*Caroline Minuscule*, Andrew Taylor's first novel, was nominated for an Edgar. Since then, he has written more than 40 books, including *The American Boy*, an international best-seller about a young Edgar Allan Poe, and *The Ashes of London*, the first of his series set in Restoration London. Other books include the Lydmouth Series, set in a small town in the 1950s, and the Roth Trilogy, filmed for TV as *Fallen Angel*.

His awards include the Diamond Dagger, the top award of the Crime Writers Association for lifetime achievement, the Historical Dagger (three times), the John Creasey Dagger, Sweden's Martin Beck prize, and the Historical Writers' Association Gold Crown for best novel of the year. His latest book is *The Royal Secret*.

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