

Dinosaur Fiction: How Velociraptors Help Us Write Past Childhood

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This article presents a little boy's struggle to write as a way to illustrate important aspects about writing fiction. The commentary provided in the side bars discusses choices about details in fiction and how these details can change the tone and feel of a work. The Velociraptor's Notes provide additional commentary on the commentary, from the point of view of Velociraptors, of course. The conclusion provides some guidance for starting the personal types of writing that are often emotionally difficult.

"Fiction is the lie that helps us understand the truth."—Tim O'Brien

This is an article about writing fiction. To show how the components function together, I've written a short story about a boy (you), and then I've used this commentary to explain my "writerly moves" and why they're important.

You write about Velociraptors because they are the only time you feel at peace. When your mother calls you to dinner, you wish you could be a dinosaur who eats wild game instead of a little boy who chews on meatloaf and broccoli while your parents talk about adult things. If you were a dinosaur, then no one would mind that you dribbled some of your creamed corn on the tablecloth. When you are a prehistoric lizard with knurled six-inch claws of hardened bone, parents do not mind that you leave a small mess around your chair, or that you wiggle in your seat because your back itches, or that you want to stay up late watching *Jurassic Park III*. When you are a dinosaur, you can go to bed whenever you want.

Velociraptor's Note: Warm-blooded assault lizards from the Jurassic period happen to be chronologically transcendental creatures, and we regretfully lament the perceived lack of attention to grammar. But we are rather busy, after all. And hungry. It doesn't help that we have been relegated to call-out boxes. But that's okay. We brought snacks.

As a genre, fiction is unique in that you have complete freedom in the form of your text. Its success is determined not by how well you “convey information,” but by how well you engage the reader in a new experience of life. And this can be very confusing, even for experienced writers. Just look at *Twilight*. Many have complained that the *Twilight* Saga is “terribly written” and yet incredibly popular. Somehow, grammar lessons simply don’t explain the blockbuster success of a vampire novel which overcomes feminism and self-actualization to portray a heroine who falls in love with her undying stalker boyfriend.

But you are not a dinosaur. You are a little boy in the sixth grade. And tonight’s homework is to write an essay. You are to include transition words with each new paragraph, and you are not allowed to start sentences with “and” or “but.” But you would rather write about dinosaurs. You would rather not listen to Dad yelling at Mom because she spent too much time on the phone this month, so the phone bill is too high. It doesn’t matter that Mom pays the phone bill because the phone bill is still too high.

Many authors continue to keep Velociraptoriness from small children. This issue, which is ignored by the media, reveals the unknown suffering of imaginary people. It is, in fact, very likely that you yourself have concluded that this small boy is “just another human being” limited to your myopic preconceptions of childhood. Far be it for us to judge—to us, he’s about as interesting as a can of Pringles. Which is to say we find him quite delectable. (Unfortunately, Microsoft Word doesn’t allow us to add footnotes to the sidebar commentary. And this saddens us. We so wanted to comment on the nutritional qualities of Edward Cullen and Bella Swan.)

Because you are a boy and not a dinosaur, you sit in your room and try to figure out how you will write your essay. You want to write a story about how you and your parents went to Walt Disney World, but you didn’t go to Disney World. Instead you drove to Iowa to see Grandma and Grandpa. And your dad drove a rental car on the gravel road out to the farm, but you can’t write about that in an essay. You don’t want to write an essay about dust. Your teacher does not want to read an essay about the disgusting stuff on the rental car windows—the dings from the rocks, the dried goo flecks of insects, and the brown film of Iowa covering every inch of the car. Your teacher wants to know what you learned this summer. She doesn’t want you to talk about dirt.

The real challenge of fiction is capturing audience attention. Usually, a fiction writer does this through details and voice. In this article, we have three narratives running at once: the boy’s, the editorial dinosaur’s, and this one. The boy is sad, the Velociraptors are irreverent (not to mention irrelevant), and I am “authoritative.” Each one of these voices is believable within its own domain, and you’ll keep reading because you want to know how these voices will interact. Will the dinosaurs crawl out from the footnotes to eat the protagonist? Or will this have a fairy tale ending?

The details make you curious. You can relate to the boy because we’ve all faced describing a disappointing summer. Awkward family moments over meatloaf, grandparents who live far away—

these are details we understand. They make the boy seem real. And we want to know what happens to real people facing real problems. And as for those Velociraptors. . . I mean, seriously? Comparing that sad little boy to a can of Pringles? What kind of sick monsters are you?

If you were a dinosaur, no one would mind that you sometimes start your sentences with “and” or “but.” But you are not a dinosaur, and you cannot write a proper essay. Your teacher has told you as much, though not with words. She smiles whenever she calls you up to her desk to talk about your writing. You once showed her the story you wrote about a homesick iguana that had never seen a rainforest. She told you she liked your story, but she said this only because she is paid to tell you that you are a good person. It is the new way of teaching, and your mother has said that this self-esteem stuff is just another way that people are giving up on the real work of raising children. “We are raising you to work,” she tells you the night you wrote your story. Your dad agrees with this. “I don’t think you realize just how good you have it,” he says. This is why they are so pissed when they discover that you have written a story about a homesick iguana named Bob who has a pet goldfish named Sally.

Fiction may start with voice and detail, but it’s plot that keeps the story going. And plot depends on conflict. Like this current dispute between myself and the Velociraptors. We have competing interpretations of the boy’s story, which adds interest to an otherwise boring article.

In writing fiction, it helps to figure out where the conflict lies. Here, a little boy is struggling to overcome the emotional distress of a dysfunctional home. In response to these challenges, characters can “take a stand,” so-to-speak. Here, though, the boy is severely limited by his age and social status; since he can’t really “fight back,” he writes.

All good fiction is built on such hurdles. Protagonists must mature with time if they are to successfully navigate the story.

When you wrote your story, you were supposed to be cleaning the bathroom, but you didn’t think Mom would get home before six, and you thought you could write your story really fast and then go upstairs to clean their bathroom before they got home. Instead you wrote about how Bob turned his basement into a swimming pool for Sally, and then they turned

It is a well-known fact that we Velociraptors have never followed the traditional written conventions of academic discourse. Prominent researchers in occupational ergonomics attribute this to the fact that it is very difficult to hold a pen when one is burdened with the responsibility of a six-inch knurled claw. Behavioral psychologists, however, believe that Velociraptors suffer from ADHD and that the distraction of the hunt makes it difficult for us to concentrate on the placement of commas, contractions, and prepositional phrases. We would form a coherent argument to dispute such baseless accusations, but that little boy just looks so yummy. Even better than Pringles, actually.

The meta-commentator is apparently paid to give heart-warming descriptions of “writing with love.” We wholeheartedly endorse these naïve notions of story. As long as you give us pork chops, we’ll endorse anything.

We’re surprised the “authoritative voice” in the margins didn’t point this out to you. As Velociraptors, we are painfully aware of the social injustices afflicting Western civilization. People assume that we don’t exist simply because they’ve only seen us in movies and on the occasional Internet meme. I mean, how would you like to be left off the invite lists for weddings, funerals, and other examples of fine dining simply because people refuse to accept you for who you are? And can we help it that we are distracted by the promise of a tasty morsel? The more we read about this little boy, the harder it is to avoid a trip to the fridge. (And you know that big tub of ketchup on the third shelf? It isn’t ketchup.)

Dad was even more angry. He made the little boy throw out his story. So we helped the little morsel fish his story out of the trash bin later that night, after his parents had gone to bed. So what if the neighbors looked at us funny for hopping up on the garbage cans and swinging our tails for balance as we fished through discarded newspapers and a pair of old slippers? We were just glad this argument happened after dinner. If it had happened before dinner, those pages of Bob and Sally would have been buried under a half-eaten mass of taco meat and sour cream. And do you have any idea how hard it is to focus on literature when you're staring at taco meat? With sour cream?

on the bathroom faucet upstairs so that the staircase in the back would become a waterfall. Sally would flop up the stairs with her tail, and then Bob would roll down the stairs while his eyes bounced around from side to side.

Mom was angry when she saw your story about Iguana Bob. "This is what you've been doing all day?" She was so sad that you wasted so much time that she was crying when she slapped your papers against your desk. "You don't do your homework and you don't do what we ask you. How would you like it if I didn't feel like making dinner?" You tell your mom you are sorry, and then you start crying because she doesn't believe how sorry you are, and then you beg and plead for her to let you clean the bathroom. You promise that it will be fast.

"You had your chance," Mom says. "You blew it."

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I really have to apologize for the dinosaurs' taco imagery. Some of our readers might be vegetarian, vegan, or lactose intolerant, and I want to assure you that this story respects your personal perspectives on food.

Strangely, a work of fiction can respect the personal beliefs of the reader while still presenting material which would be insulting to the same reader. In this case, the irreverence of the carnivore imagery is offset by the fact that this imagery is manufactured by disgusting beasts constrained to the marginal space of call-out boxes. This signals to you that the author wishes to portray a balanced yet complete view of reality.

At school the next day, you don't want your teacher to see the story about Bob. But she catches you smoothing the pages when you are supposed to be doing long division. The pages—there are four—are smudged and wrinkled, and you want to make them look better. The outside edge of your writing hand is still gray from the pencil lead because of how hard you were writing last night, and your words on the page are crooked and dirty. But you still want to write about how Bob's parents come home early from work, and that they are iguanas, too, and that they turn their roly-polly eyes on the waterfall coming down the stairs. Bob says that it's okay, that he'll clean it up before dinner. So Bob and Sally turn off the water, and then they dry the floor with a mop, and then Sally moves to the bathtub so they can drain the water from the basement. And then Bob goes back to the main floor for dinner, and his mom and his dad talk about how he did a good job cleaning up the steps and

the basement, and they say he can have some ice cream after dinner while they all go upstairs to the TV room to watch a movie.

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When your teacher catches you erasing the smudges from around the words about Bob, you know that you're in trouble. She takes the pages to her desk, and she asks to see you after class, and you don't even finish your long division before the bell rings. You know that Mrs. R. will give you another note to take home, and that she'll staple it closed because you're not supposed to read it before Mom does, and Mom will leave the note with the mail and keep drinking her coffee and tell you to leave her alone because she's had a bad day at work.

Oh, meta-commentator, don't you realize that we are mere pawns under our author's oppressive keystroke? He is using external details to reveal the disconnect between internal feelings and "objective" reality. We are disappointed but hardly surprised by your lack of perception. We suspect that you are about as smart as a slab of uncured salami. With a side of pickles. But no Pringles.

Go ahead, you stupid lizards—compare me to food. I, meanwhile, will explain that fiction is built on the conflicts which arise from personal relationships. Notice that the boy has issues with his parents—the relationship with his teacher reveals that the problem isn't just him, but rather the abusive nature of a difficult family life.

Now, if this was a longer story, we would nuance these relationships still further. We'd show that the parents themselves are the victims of their own relationships, and that the teacher does not have the time to spend hours and hours with one of her dozens of students. The imbalances in these relationships force our protagonist to overcome a difficult home life without becoming dependent on underpaid civil servants for his long-term emotional support.

Mrs. R. doesn't give you a note to take home. But you know she doesn't like your story. She just wants you to feel good. But when Mom and Dad were kids, teachers taught. They made you write, and they made you read, and they made you do your long division. Mom calls it a travesty the way people don't know how to add up the change from when you buy something, and you asked her what a traffesty was, and she told you that you have a dictionary, so go look it up. You tried to look it up, but you don't know how to spell trastity, so you couldn't find it.

Dinosaurs have no use for words they can't spell. Any word that doesn't have the decency to spell itself correctly should go extinct.

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Through writing, we can connect with others in ways that are often impossible through speech. Stephen King presents writing as a form of "telepathy" (103), as a forum for "a meeting of the minds" (106). Or, as Tim O'Brien puts it, "What stories

can do...is make things present" (204) for others, for those who weren't there. The best way to accomplish this is through detail. Here, we see the cleaning of the bathroom. We go deep into the protagonist's emotions, into how much he hates cleaning bathrooms. And this reveals how his home life has warped his perceptions—because no sixth grader should be this intimately familiar with the smell of household cleansers.

Velociraptors disdain the use of toilets for this very reason. We prefer to use the sides of old trees. Also, we are intimately familiar with the importance of social relationships. We are pack hunters, after all. This is why we cannot write in the first-person singular—it just wouldn't feel right. And the voice should always match the narrators. Because when you are ordering hot wings over the phone, delivery is always faster when they hear that there are eight or nine or twenty of us growling for more. I mean, assuming they've found a new delivery guy after that last time.

It is another night. You have to clean the bathroom on the main floor before Mom gets home. You are wiping off the toilet. You have a system for cleaning it so that the dirty parts of the toilet will not contaminate the clean parts. You start with the handle, because it is silver and people have to touch it with their fingers. And then you go to the lid over the tank because no one ever touches that, and it only has dust. Then you clean the lid over the bowl because sometimes people sit on it, but they are still wearing pants when they do. Then you clean the seat, because it touches your buns, and you don't want the bun germs to touch the other parts of the toilet. Then you clean the really gross part behind the lid because sometimes there's yellow pee dried to the toilet back there, and your dad will yell at you if that part isn't clean, and then you clean the rim under the seat, because it's also gross, but sometimes not as gross.

I don't like hot wings. Maybe our author does. Or maybe he's hungry again. Either way, he thinks these distractions of life add "flavor" to the story. I disagree. A story should move forward. Each detail should directly contribute to the plot or characterization.

Now, in this next part, you'll see a transition. Our protagonist has made a realization about life: he sees that the "happy" stories simply aren't interesting enough. Now, this may be subjective, or it could come through the result of painstaking market analysis of publication standards as stated by Wikipedia. Either way, I want you to note that the increasing darkness of his fiction corresponds with the growing sense of futility in his life.

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You decide that you should have never written about iguanas—especially not an iguana named Bob. It is, perhaps, one of the dumbest stories you've ever read. It's more like a cartoon than a book, the kind of slapstick-with-lizard-and-pet-fish which would never sell at Barnes and Noble.

You're looking for success. You want to do well as a writer. You want to express a story worth reading. Clearly, it is time to write about dinosaurs.

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Unfortunately, you don't need a story about dinosaurs. Tonight you need an essay about whether or not students should wear uniforms to school. It should be five paragraphs—one paragraph of introduction, three paragraphs of information, and then a conclusion. You are supposed to convince people one way or the other. Mrs. R. has recommended writing about why uniforms are good because it is easier to write that essay—you can say that uniforms promote social equality by forcing everyone to dress the same way, or you can say that they are cheaper than purchasing designer clothes at the mall. But you don't like uniforms. You like wearing jeans to school. And you think other students should have the freedom to wear jeans if they want to.

Fact: It is always time to write about dinosaurs. And as a side note, our meta-commentator has neglected his own ideals. How, we ask, can you possibly say that "detail is everything" if you insist on limiting your descriptions to those which directly impact the plot? How can you hope to represent the truly disjointed experience of life without acknowledging the somewhat arbitrary nature of details? If a detail feels right, we recommend adding it to the story. You can always delete it later if you need to.

It is easier to write about dinosaurs. You can write about Tyrannosaurs and their continual quest for justice. They are, after all, strong enough to be brave. If they wore uniforms, they would wear army pants. Their little arms would claw at the air, pointing out which parts of the toilet are still dirty, and they would point their Volkswagen snouts at the toilet to smell for grossness. "That's not a clean toilet," one might say, its strong voice coming out like Barbara Streisand with a mouth full of rocks. The other one—the father dinosaur—would point out the obvious: "I can smell your laziness from here." You don't know how to write your essay for school and you shouldn't write about dinosaurs. So instead you make paper airplanes.

In writing fiction, we are often asked "how much of this is real?" This is a difficult question to answer. As Sue Miller asks, "Is it true that we have no choice but to echo what's happened to us and to those we know?" (158). "Fiction" does not mean "false"—it simply means that you've taken artistic license with the details and events in order to express some truth about life. As Miller relates, some authors simply retell their own lives in very precise detail; others, however, create worlds vastly different from their own. Either way, the honesty of your search for meaning is more important than the "facts" you choose to share. "It is the struggle for meaning that lets the writer escape the tyranny of what really happened and begin to dream his fictional dream" (Miller 159).

By the time your parents get home, your failure as a person is clear. You don't hear your father as he comes in and walks up to your room. He stands

in your doorway, still in his trench coat, the shoulders damp from the drizzle outside. You feel the rage before he speaks. You cannot bear to look, his gaze is so sharp. He tells you that those airplanes better be gone by dinner.

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Years later, you are faced with the task of writing an article. It is meant to be brief yet informative. You want others to see an approach to fiction—not necessarily your own approach, but something they can apply to their own writing. And after the first draft, the reviewers recommend revising the ending. How, they wonder, will the image of a little boy guarding his airplanes and manuscripts help others take up the pen? Is the story only meant to show us that sad people can use writing to cope with their sadness?

You want to say that there is something deeper to writing, that sadness alone is not enough. This is, after all, what past professors have told you. And you don't want to give the impression that writing is only possible for those who suffer—that isn't the case at all.

A true story about Velociraptors would taste faintly of pork chops. Fortunately, this is a work of fiction.

And so you pick up your pen. You decide—because this is your fixation at the moment—that the story must be about dinosaurs. And the dinosaurs, because they are brave, will say all the things about fiction that you yourself are afraid to write.

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Ryan Edel is a Ph.D. student in English Studies at Illinois State. He has an MFA in creative writing from Johns Hopkins University. As a U.S. Army veteran, he has previously served with the 82nd Airborne in Afghanistan. Ryan is very concerned by today's lack of Velociraptor awareness. His friends and colleagues have repeatedly assured him that dinosaurs do not currently exist, but the only "proof" they offer is the fact that no one alive has ever seen one. And that's kind of the point. If you saw one, do you really think you'd still be around to talk about it? No. You'd be halfway digested. Ryan currently resides in a sealed concrete bunker at an undisclosed location. You can find his writing website at [Facebook.com/12Writing](https://www.facebook.com/12Writing).

