

READY, SET, WRITE!

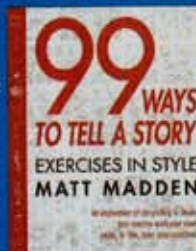
TELL A STORY IN 99 WAYS WITH MATT MADDEN

By Bryon Cahill

A man sits at his computer. He stands and walks to the kitchen. His wife calls from upstairs and asks for the time. "It's 1:15," he tells her. He opens the refrigerator door and realizes he's forgotten what he was looking for.



How many different ways can you tell this story? In the book *99 Ways to Tell a Story: Exercises in Style*, comic-book artist Matt Madden offers 99 versions of one simple scenario—as monologue, as personification, as a map, and even as a superhero tale!



Madden's idea was inspired by *Exercises in Style*, a 1947 book by French author Raymond Queneau, who rewrote a basic and pretty boring story in 99 interesting ways, including free verse, sonnet, haiku, telegram, and pig Latin.

"There are so many different kinds of experiences that can happen to people, whether ordinary or fantastic," Madden told *Writing*. "What changes is the way the story is told: the setting, the voice, the rhythm ... and the point of view. The trick is to tell your tale from a new angle—mix it up, turn it inside out, give it a fresh perspective."

What *is* perspective, you ask? "Think of a camera placed on the floor, looking up at a giant foot coming down to squash the viewer as opposed to a camera looking down at a group of people from the top of a building," Madden explains. "One gives the viewer a sense of helplessness; the other, a sense of power. You can use both in the same story to show [different] points of view."

In *99 Ways*, Madden played hard with perspective. On these pages, he talks us through his inspiration for three of his stories—the original template, personification, and a superhero comic—and shares some writing tips. His ideas are sure to put you on your way to writing at least 99 great stories!



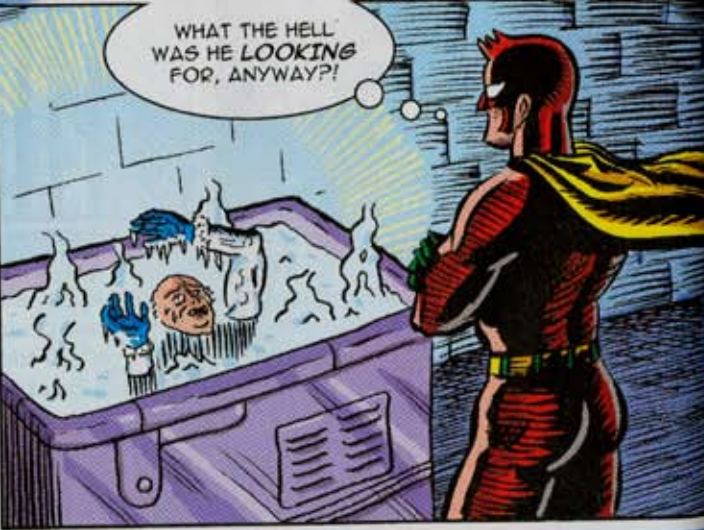
Hi, I'm Matt Madden.

If you think it's hard to make up an interesting **template** or starter story, try making up a boring one—it was one of the hardest parts of the project! Finally, I decided to sketch out a few everyday scenarios that might happen to me and my wife. I finally hit upon the refrigerator story, which never happened, although it is very common for me to forget what I'm doing in the middle of doing it.



Personification has a long history

in storytelling and art, from classical poetry to cartoons like *Toy Story* and *Cars*. I play with both ideas here by having the objects come to life ... [so that they] seem to reflect the mood and feelings of the human characters. Visually, this comic is almost exactly the same as the original story, or template. In the first panel, though, we notice something odd: The computer announces it's sleepy. You might not even notice the first time around, but the dialogue is no longer being spoken by the human characters. I moved the tails of the word balloons, so the spiral staircase asks the time, and the watch answers ... and it is the refrigerator that wonders what Matt is looking for anyway.



Any medium, whether it's a novel, a play, a comic, or a video game, is just a container for all kinds of stories. This comic plays around with some of the conventions of **superhero comics**: the bright colors, the busy layouts that are sometimes hard to read, the stock hero and the quirky bad guy—in this case called the Refrigerator—who are having a conversation in the middle of their fistfight. The mundane elements of my story are now transformed into the overblown theatrics of a superhero comic.

MATT MADDEN'S TIPS FOR DIVING RIGHT IN

A lot of people think writers ... [lie] around looking romantic and cool until the Muse hits them with Inspiration to create a Work of Genius. Don't be fooled by this myth. Anyone can be an artist, because art is a creative activity and not a gift that you sit around waiting for. Don't worry if you think you have nothing interesting to say: The great thing about art is that you often discover what you're talking about while you're working on it. The important thing is to dive in and get your hands dirty!

Give yourself a very strict rule, even a random or [an] absurd one, like making yourself tell the same story 99 times. Starting from a constraint makes writing like a game or a puzzle; it takes your mind off the intimidating BLANK PAGE. For example, try to write a paragraph in which you never use the vowel e:

You may think that sounds simp--oops!--that is to say, uh, not hard, but you will quickly find that normal things you say all th--or, um ... things you say day in and day out, now you can't, so you must think of unusual ways to writ--that is, ways to jot down words (but don't worry if you can't stand it--it is OK, on occasion, to cheat!).

What I just wrote is actually a kind of word game called a lipogram, a text in which one or more letters are forbidden. Word games are a good place to start from when you are trying to write. Try these:

- **palindrome**—a phrase that reads the same forward and backward, like "Go hang a salami, I'm a lasagna hog!"
- **pangram**—a sentence that uses all the letters of the alphabet, such as "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog."

Games like these can be fun exercises in themselves, but they can also be used as a starting point for stories. Say I want to write a short story involving dogs and cats. To get started, I might make a word chain (a chain of words in which each new word changes one letter from the previous one) connecting the words *dog* and *cat*:

DOG COG COT CAT

Now I have the words *cog* and *cot* to play around with. Those words suggest a wooden wheel and a simple dwelling, respectively, which makes me think I could do a story about a dog who shows up on a farm and makes friends with a cat who sleeps on a cot. There's still a lot of work to do if I want to make this a good story. But, hey, it's a start, and at least I'm not staring at that BLANK PAGE anymore!

WRITE A 100TH STORY

Can you think of another way to tell Matt Madden's refrigerator tale? E-mail your story, poem, comic, collage, video, podcast, ice sculpture, or whatever you come up with to word@weeklyreader.com. We'll post the most creative stories at our blog [WORD \(www.readandwriting.com\)](http://WORD(www.readandwriting.com))—and send the creator of our favorite story a free autographed copy of Matt Madden's book **99 Ways to Tell a Story**. (Tip: For more inspiration, see www.exercisesinstyle.com.)