

SCAFFOLDING

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From

Breathing the Page

Cormorant Books, 2010

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*Something is obfuscating or bogging down my narrative — what should I look for to
figure out what it is?*

Scaffolding is the necessary writing done during the inscription of our early drafts. It helps build narrative. Whether scaffolding is rudimentary and temporary or elaborate and erected for a considerable portion of our narrative whether it manifests on the level of our line structure or on the level of paragraphs, stanzas, or chapters, all scaffolding must be removed in later drafts. If we fail to do so, scaffolding will inevitably overshadow the vivacity of the narrative. It quite literally deadens the narrative.

Scaffolding: 1. platform from which criminals are executed (hanged or beheaded).

In my experience, there are four different motivating factors that propel us to use scaffolding: notations, encodement, laziness, and attachment. Once we understand which of these motivations typifies us as writers, it then becomes far easier for us to identify scaffolding in our narratives. Of these four motivating factors, notation is likely the one of which we may already be aware. During inscription, when we sense or know that we are missing some aspects of the narrative, we may write passages and sections in a cursory, notational manner. We do this to register that these bits must be fleshed out later; this scaffolding functions as a form of shorthand. When the writing is going well, when we are on the scent of the narrative, this is not the time to disengage from inscription to do the thinking, research, or experimentation required to flesh out these weak spots. The danger, of course, is that we overlook these areas later and fail to do the necessary additional work.

The second motivating factor is encodement. This is perhaps the most vexing of the three. Unlike notation, we most often are not aware we are using encodement. Encodement is just what it says: the narrative we write has areas that are encoded: only we can fill in the blanks; only we know the meaning of what those puzzling traces and verbal gestures hold. These are the spots where the reader becomes confused, puzzled, even frustrated for they keenly sense that they are being excluded. When a reader of our works-in-progress says “I don’t understand what is happening,” “You lost me here,” or “Something is missing,” they are most often correct. Encodement originates in the family and sometimes community. It works well among those who intimately share a narrative. It’s one of those situations where one can finish another’s sentence. Our readers are seldom in this category. When I mention encodement to a writer, she or he often replies “But it’s there!” When I ask him or her to show me exactly where “it is there,” they are surprised its missing: it is there only in their own memory or imagination.

The third motivating factor is quite simply laziness. Perhaps, to be fair, it is not only laziness but also a subtle distrust of the reader’s intelligence. This form of scaffolding

will be recognizable in its stiff and often tedious tone and proximity. It functions as unnecessary commentary and explanation. A term I have coined and use often for it is “billboarding.” I sometimes refer to this tendency (which we all have) as “dumbing down the reader.” The writer figuratively holds up a billboard that states things in a pedantic fashion. When we take the time to evoke the scene, dialogue, extended metaphor, or unique unfolding of an insight, the reader also enjoys the pleasures of getting it. We have given them a role in how the narrative is generating itself.

The fourth scaffolding factor is perhaps the most challenging: attachment. Simply said, the writer becomes so attached to or enamoured with a passage, or section, or minor character, that they fail to recognize it is too self-conscious, precious, or out of place.

Sometimes scaffolding may be referred to as “pre-writing:” the writing you do, similar to warm-up stretching, before you go for a run or work-out. I also think of it as a dog circling around before it lies down on the floor. The writer senses what the narrative requires, and is trying to find the way in. A dog circles because it instinctually remembers doing so in the wild to beat down the grass in order to lie down. We might also think of it as setting the stage; but, again, we need to remember that stage-setting isn’t the narrative, instead it’s the narrative’s interaction of characters, thoughts, or images. Sometimes, our sophistication in writing scaffolding mimes the actual narrative but it eventually obstructs access to the narrative and weakens its focus and energy.

In my book *The Bat Had Blue Eyes*, I incorporated eight short Buddhist sutras that not only gave focus to the narrative, but also drove the narrative forward to where it wanted to go. Trusting the comments of one of my reliable first readers, however, I later had to accept (with the nudge of a good writer-editor friend) that all but one of these sutras needed to be deleted. At first it felt like prying the jewels out of the crown, but soon I could see that the narrative required an unadorned, solitary voice. Scaffolding, though vital to the creation of a narrative, ultimately strikes the reader as artifice, signage, a tangent, that’s unnecessary.

Scaffolding: 2. a temporary platform used by workers in the construction, repair, or cleaning of a building.

Try identifying the scaffolding as you read the excerpt below, then assess how your reading experience changes in version two.

“Triple Twenty” (original draft)

[Pat Buckna]

There was nowhere to practice indoors at the Birkett Manor except in the basement, but the concrete walls quickly dulled the points of darts that missed and there was no telling what awful things might emerge from the dark crawl space. The apartment’s brick exterior didn’t work and it was strictly forbidden to hang the board on either of the two entrance doors. That left only the laundry platform: a tall wooden structure with stairs, handrails, and landing large enough to accommodate two women with full laundry baskets. Immediately below where they stood hung the large dartboard; twenty feet in front of them stood the young dartsman taking aim. Summers are short in Alberta and don’t provide many days for either hanging laundry or perfecting triple-twenties.

Making a triple-twenty is simply a matter of concentration: grasping the thin dart at its balance point, concentrating on the landing spot, visualizing the slight arc of the dart when it leaves the hand, then waiting for the thwump as it lands – point buried, feathers trembling – right on target. Not all throws are successful; some fall low and to the left and earn only a single point, and a few actually fall short, landing in the dirt under the laundry platform. Over many days of practice, the wooden edges of the platform become pitted with

a series of holes from errant darts, but generally more darts pierce the board than miss. One day, however, a young tenant from Apartment Two, standing on the platform with a dress in one hand and a pin in the other, let out a painful cry.

“The Laundry Platform” (revised after removal of scaffolding)

The young tenant from Apartment Seven had her hands full. She stood on the laundry platform and as she reached up to hang a wet undergarment on the clothesline, a dart came whizzing out of nowhere and stabbed her in the leg. A few feet away on the grass stood the caretaker’s son, his arm lifted, fingers pointed towards the small dartboard that hung from a spike on the side of the laundry platform, directly below the young woman’s feet.

The instant the dart struck the young woman’s leg, the slip she was pinning to the line fell like a wet rag and she let out a scream, which frightened the caretaker’s son – the one who’d thrown the damn dart that had hit her in the leg.

When she pulled that damn dart from her leg, she saw the red bloodstain on the tip, the same red that now trickled down her leg towards her ankle. It must be lonely, she thought, for a child to live in this apartment filled with old people. She set the dart down on the platform beside her, wiped the blood from her leg then licked her finger. It tasted like tears...

When the writer Pat Buchna removed the scaffolding that comprised most of his original draft, he allowed the actual narrative to take centre stage and unfold. The result is a far more compelling narrative that locates us inside the emotional and sensate experience of the boy, and this scene becomes vivid and achingly lonely.

Once you are aware of how scaffolding functions, you’ll find it easy to identify and

eliminate. This process may require minor cleaning – removing the opening line or two of a poem or the tempting punchline at the end of a poem, or it may call for a ruthless execution. One award-winning author I know had to remove 40 percent of her novel. The presence of scaffolding must be questioned in every piece of writing. It is not something we grow out of as writers. It is an ongoing part of the writing process. It is important, however, to reassure ourselves routinely that no effort is lost nor writing wasted during the scaffolding stage of inscription.

A caution. Do be careful to not delete a semi-conscious or conscious reclaiming of a device that might typically function as scaffolding. For example, Emily Dickinson's editor corrected her extensive use of dashes — later they were reinserted into her poems when it became apparent that Dickinson was intentionally reframing the function and effect of the dash — not realizing that this was one of her signature compositional strategies and a distinct aspect of her voice.

A reminder. Although scaffolding is a strategy you use in early drafts, sometimes you will find yourself introducing it during revisions. This happens when you are experiencing doubts about trusting your readers' acuity, when you are not confident in your narrative's ability to sustain the reader's attention, or when some vital aspect has gone unexplored in the narrative and simply needs to be further developed.