

Naming Things

by Don Hart

ONE OF A WRITER'S TRICKIEST TASKS IS NAMING THINGS. NAMES FOR CHARACTERS IN A STORY. Names for chapters in a book. An excellent name for your short story or magazine article. A great book title. If these are well chosen and truly appropriate, your readers' experience will be enhanced, and your writings become memorable and enjoyable, even powerful.

Choosing a good name for your story setting is important too, whether it's a colorful name for a town, a neighborhood hangout, or an unusual business establishment. Writers are also called upon to name an episode, a circumstance, or a foolish law. *Oliver Twist*, *The Lottery*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Owls Head Mountain*, *Cockroach Canyon*, *The Thomas Crown Affair*, *Jeckyl's in Hyde Park* (my favorite restaurant), the *Smoot-Hawley Act* are all good names, but do the names you select fit your character, your short story, novel, setting, or unusual circumstances? Names need to be more than catchy, and it helps if they are brief and one or two syllables. The main thing is that great names help you tell that cracking good story, which all readers crave.

Among the earliest episodes of our written culture, the importance of designating names is described in *Genesis*. After God created the animals, it states, He delegated Adam to name them all:

Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field.

Even though Adam had a good situation in Paradise, labeling these beasts may not have been all that much fun. Such a difficult undertaking would require a plan, but as far as anyone knows, Adam had none. Without an established culture and vocabulary, or a way to record these choices, Adam was completely on his own, and his choice of names may not have been as good as possible.

Choose Suitable, Memorable Names for Characters

First, writers have a strong obligation to give their characters a fitting name. One of my favorite authors for this job is Charles Dickens. His stories have huge authenticity, if

What's in a name? A lot. An excellent name for a character, place, or book title can make or break your story. Here's how to pick the best.

not pure entertainment value, through names like David Copperfield, Ebenezer Scrooge, Miss Havisham (as in "have a sham"), Uriah Heep, Edwin Drood, and Nicholas Nickleby. Some of these were "over the top," but we love them anyway: Martin Chuzzlewit, Wilkins Micawber, Mrs. Pipchin, Abel Magwitch, Wackford Squeers, Seth Pecksniff. In most cases the characters' names described their roles in the story, predicted their purpose, and remained memorable long after the tale was told. Quite a few, like Dickens' other apt names, became downright eponymous.

When I was a child my dad read to me about King Arthur and Sir Lancelot. The great knight had a big reputation for jousting and managed to use his lance to knock all the other warriors off their horses. "What's a lance, Daddy?" I asked. After he showed me this weapon in a picture, he also mentioned that the knight got his name because he liked to "lance a lot." "If he had just used his sword or knife, he probably would have been called Sir Stabbalot or maybe Sir Cuttalot." I have loved this fabrication all the days of my life.

Character names need to represent the players in your story, or they may fall totally flat, dragging down some of your best work. If the name seems incongruous with the actor as the story unfolds, the reader is jolted out of the tale, unconsciously annoyed with your selection.

Imagine the following examples: In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* the name of the protagonist is Bruce Babcock instead of Randy McMurphy. The antagonist is Meghan Mayfield instead of Nurse Ratched. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the name of Stella's husband is Arthur Winchester rather than Stanley Kowalski, and her sister is Polly Hanlin rather than Blanche DuBois.

Or worse, in *Gone With the Wind*, instead of the main characters being Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler, they are called Sylvia Smathers and Hector Griswold. Some inexperienced writers actually allow such misnomers. Perhaps it's done because the protagonist in their story had a name similar to their misnamed character, and, as the story is written, the author imagines that person, rather than one with a more befitting name. Compare those names to the ones chosen by the great writers of these original stories:

In *Cuckoo's Nest*, Randy McMurphy is a near perfect name for

a sexy badboy whose antics have landed him in an institution where Murphy's Law prevails non-stop. (Good job in the movie, Jack Nicholson.) A nurse named Meghan Mayfield does not strike us as someone likely to bring mayhem under control. However, if Ken Kesey, the novelist here, were interviewing candidates for the job of ratcheting up fascist control over a mad house, wouldn't Nurse Ratched make more sense?

Writing *Streetcar*, Tennessee Williams needed a name for a second generation Polish-American, down-to-earth, passionate, working stiff who had recently returned from the brutalities of World War II. Ergo Stanley Kowalski. Arthur Winchester is not the right name. Also Polly Hanlin is the wrong name for a cultured woman, once from upper Southern society, a former teacher broken by disgrace and impoverishment. Blanche DuBois is a good fit for a lady forced to move in with her sister in New Orleans.

Margaret Mitchell had a fine ear for Southern names. Her choice of Scarlett O'Hara was just right for a cheeky, love-obsessed daughter of an Irish plantation owner, smitten with men who were all wrong for her. She could never be a Sylvia, much less a Smathers. Too bland for such a fighter. Rhett Butler, though, sounds like a signature name for an artillery captain, a brazen smuggler, and a man who knows how to accumulate big money. This fine author of *Gone With The Wind* had other felicitous picks with characters like Aunt Pittypat, Prissy, Pork and Dilcey, in addition to all her surnames describing the reputability of Atlanta society.

Choose Catchy, Succinct, Timely Titles for Books, Stories, and Articles

Well-suited titles for your books, short stories, essays and articles are crucial to any writer's success. Just as a leader must be accepted before attempting to turn on the magic of leadership, an author must catch a reader's attention before trying to tell a story.

Writing is about entertainment and teaching. The writer's "hook" needs to come early in the work to get that attention flowing, it's true. But the best "hook" is very often the title itself. If the title is catchy, timely, unusual, and new, chances are improved that a reader will look further. If it's bland and pedestrian, the chances fall. Grab that browsing reader with a different title page and odds are you'll at least get a look. If your title is a worn cliché, you have some serious resistance before connecting with that all-important reader, the life-giving force of your writing.

Many titles are lifted from the Bible or Shakespeare's plays. Some repeat current street slang, songs, or buzzwords. The trick is to see that they fit with the content and story that follows. Choose your book title with great care. Can it tell us what your story is about in a concise, clear, and clever phrase? However, don't make the mistake of telling too much or making it clichéd. Point your readers in the direction of your theme without over-involving them in coming details. Be seductive enough so they want more. You do that by making

them want to solve a question your title has already posed. How do you like this book title?

Four and a Half Years of My Struggle Against Lies, Stupidity and Cowardice

Translated into German, it first read *Viereinhalb Jahren mein Kampf gegen Lüge, Dummheit und Feigheit*. Too long and much too vague to be a good title. Finally someone convinced Adolf Hitler that *Mein Kampf* would be a better title, although the book itself was terrible.

Now, back to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. This title actually came from a nursery rhyme and is relevant to the story's setting of mayhem in a psychiatric hospital, where everything seems childish and confused, except maybe an imaginary goose flight over cuckoos. The kiddie rhyme goes:

*Vintery, mintery, cutery, corn,
Apple seed and apple thorn,
Wire, briar, limber lock
Three geese in a flock.*

*One flew East.
One flew West.
And one flew over the cuckoo's nest.*

For a final thought on Naming Things, I like what George Orwell and Confucius have contributed to the craft. Since we live in times when people are dangerously careless with words, the wisdom of the ancient and the modern man both provide help. Orwell wrote: "Let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way around."

Confucius wrote extensively on the Rectification of Names. He believed that social disorder often stemmed from failure to perceive, understand, and deal with real things. The ancient rectification principle implies that naming is not only important in practical and communication terms but also creates correct meaning and configures relations and structures within society. Using precise, correct, and honest words became the mark of all the great men of China, including the Emperor himself. When a new dynasty was established, a ritual (the Rectification of Names) was celebrated to clear out "wrong names" and reinstitute correct names.

Great writing always seems to display great authenticity, even if it is fiction. Good names not only put us in direct touch with reality, they also portray a "literary rectitude." So the answer to the old riddle "What is truer than true?" surely must be: A Good Story.

Don Hart is the co-editor and a contributing author of *Anthology of Christmas Memories* (available in print for \$10.95 at <https://www.createpace.com/3698022> and as a Kindle e-book) and *Anthology of Tragedies and Triumphs* (available in print for \$10.95 at <https://www.createpace.com/4029534> and as a Kindle e-book).