



Alison's Top Five Tips for Writing Emotional Stories

1. Character is everything

Relationships, reactions and behaviours are all driven by emotion and emotion is rooted in character. If you're really struggling to make a story line work, always start by going back to your characters. Are these people behaving consistently with their characters? If you're not sure, you might need to work a little bit harder to work out who your characters are.

2. Conflict is (also) everything

Let's think about romance plotlines as an example. In real-life the perfect romance goes like this:

Two people meet. They're both attracted to the other. They start going out. Kissy kissy, bouncy bouncy, no complications, and they both live happily ever after.

Unfortunately fiction doesn't work like real-life. In fiction a romantic story relies on conflict, both external (eg. She is a powerful property developer determined to build new houses on derelict land. He is an environmental activist sworn to protect the rare ladybirds living on the apparently derelict land, and hence... conflict) and internal (eg. She is worried about letting down her family whose property development business she now runs, and also wary of appearing weak as a woman in a man's world. He is worried about losing face and not being taken seriously amongst his environmentalist buddies, and terrified that he'll repeat his past mistake of backing down too easily in a fight.)

Those are not brilliant examples, but internal conflict in particular is vital to an engaging emotional story - the deeper you can make that internal conflict the better.

3. Keep the writing real

Try to use your senses as much as possible and describe the physical and emotional experiences in the story as freshly as possible, rather than relying on books, films, TV, poetry etc that you've seen before.

Visual artists talk about trying to 'see what is actually there' rather than what they imagine to be there. That's a good tip for writers too.

4. Put the action on the page

In fiction stuff has to happen. When you're writing about emotion it's really tempting to write lots of scenes where people sit quietly and emote. Don't. Make stuff happen to your characters, and then SHOW their emotions through the ways they react to that stuff happening.

It's also really tempting to be all clever and artsy and allude to the big dramatic thing that has just happened or is about to happen. That's fine if you're purposefully trying to keep your reader guessing and building up to a big plot reveal, but often it's actually just a sign that you're scared of writing a particular Big Scene. Don't be - just write something. You can always edit it later, but if it's an important scene that changes your characters or moves the story forward significantly it shouldn't happen 'off-screen.'

5. Finally, keep going

Writing a whole novel is daunting. It's an awful lot of words, and if you count all the terrible words you will inevitably write and then delete then it's an even more awful lot of words. And putting deep emotion into your story can be difficult too. It's easy to feel like you're slipping into cliché and that everything you've written is corny. It's easy to want to give up. Don't. Really this last tip isn't specific to writing emotion but it's the most important tip there is for any writing: Just don't give up. Feeling like you can't make a story work is normal. Feeling like everything you've written is a steaming pile of poo is normal. Feeling embarrassed at the idea of your mum/children/gran reading the sexy bits is normal. Writers who achieve publication are the writers who have persevered through all those feelings and kept developing and kept improving. Good luck.