

You can write...yes, you can!

Step one

Super-spying

Good writing begins with sneaky spying. Be on the lookout; you never know when someone will say or do something that gives you an idea for the best story ever. Just remember these super-spy tips:

- ❖ Keep a notebook handy. If you see or hear something interesting, write it down so you don't forget it.
- ❖ Act like you're not paying attention. Stare into space, write in your notebook, or pose like a statue.
- ❖ Don't wear a fake nose, funny glasses or other disguises. People will stare at you instead of going about their own business. Then you'll have nothing to write about.
- ❖ Don't peek in windows. Remember what Martha said to George (before tossing a bathtub onto his head): "...there is such a thing as privacy." (James Marshall, *George and Martha*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972.)

Step two

What if...?

Imagine that while you're spying you see a little girl eating an ice cream cone. The ice cream topples off the cone and plops to the ground. Sounds pretty boring, right? But start asking "what if" questions:

- ❖ *What if the ice cream sprouts into millions of ice cream plants?*
- ❖ *What if the little girl becomes the first ice cream farmer ever?*
- ❖ *What if summer comes and the ice cream plants start to melt?*

Remember, this is fiction. Even though the girl really did drop her ice cream, you can make up the rest of the story. This is called fiction, and it is not the same as lying.

Keep asking "what if" questions until you have the bones of a story. Then start getting to know your main character.

- ❖ *How old is she?*

- ❖ *How does he talk?*
- ❖ *Where is she from?*
- ❖ *What is his favorite book?*
- ❖ *Who is her best friend?*
- ❖ *What makes him really mad?*
- ❖ *What makes her really happy?*
- ❖ *What is he scared of?*
- ❖ *What does she want more than anything in the world?*

In creating your character, you might try imagining someone you know well. Often authors model their characters after a friend or family member – and the person doesn't even know. Of course, changing the name might be a good idea.

Step three

Sit in the chair and write, write, write

Don't worry about spelling, commas, periods, or neatness at this point. Just keep writing. You might write the whole story at once. Or you might write it in pieces. Some writers set daily goals – two pages per day, four pages per day, etc. Just keep moving forward. Then put it away for a few days before looking at it again.

Step four

Revisions: You thought your story was perfect, but...

After you've taken a little break, read your story again. (Reading it aloud is a good idea.) Then ask yourself a few questions:

- ❖ Does the story make sense?
- ❖ Who is the main character?
- ❖ Does the reader get to know him enough to care about what happens to him?

- ❖ Do the characters seem real?
- ❖ Characters should not be all bad or all good.
- ❖ What is the main problem of the story? (Or, what does the character want but can't get?)
- ❖ Is there anything extra in the story?
- ❖ Each part of the story should tell something about the character or move her toward solving her problem. If it doesn't, consider taking it out or changing it—even if it sounds really smart.

Step five

Show and listen

Gather a group of fellow-writers and friends to share work and offer critique. (Critique is a fancy word that means reading or listening to each other's work and telling the author what you think.) To make sure your critique group is helpful and fun, remember the following tips:

- ❖ Start with positive comments. The author will feel better if you begin by telling her which parts you really like and why. Be specific! Don't just say, "I like the beginning." Instead say, "I like the way you started with the action of the dog falling off the boat. It got me interested right away."
- ❖ After telling the author what you like, gently point out areas that are confusing or could be better. Again, be specific. Don't just say, "I didn't like the beginning." Instead, say, "I wonder whether you could get to the action a little bit faster."
- ❖ Don't try to tell the author how to fix a problem. Once you point out areas that need work, it's up to the author to figure out what he or she wants to do.
- ❖ If you are the author, don't get upset, argue or try to explain why you wrote what you wrote. Remember, your group members are trying to help. In the end, you can decide what to change and how to change it.