The Writing Philosophy of Words as Blank Spaces, for Composing Scenes of Fiction

The core principle: A Word, any word or phrase, is ultimately a blank space, a white, blank canvas, and you don't know the content, the image, the meaning, the situation, that fills it.

This means, in our writing, as we frame the situations we are about to create, we have to get away from the definitions that we think we know apply.

What is "a conversation between friends" ? No matter how many conversations you've had with your friends, those situations do not define the situation you are about to write. The words in the phrase "a conversation between friends" are a blank canvas, and the situations that you know of that you think define its meaning and fill it with content do not apply.

So, as I write, I have to step out of the box of my familiar world, and start thinking, and analyzing, and questioning, and exploring, and weighing, and creating. Instead of looking at the familiar world, instead of staring at the phrase "a conversation between friends" and depending on what normally is or what always has been as its definition, meaning, and situation, I have to ask What could be? What is possible?

And, yes, this doesn't mean that a word or a phrase can be anything. Every noun in the dictionary has essential characteristics that make it what it is. A "conversation between friends" will always be something different than "an argument between enemies," because the words conversation, friends, argument, and enemies all are structured with essential elements—a structure that we have to work within.

But we can realize, within the essential elements and structures of the words, there flows all the variations, all the spectrums of life. Are the friends ages seven and eight, or are they ages 79 and 81? Do the friends see each other every day, or has it been years? Do they come for the same, or variant, financial backgrounds? Is there an underlying conflict between the friends? Are the friends embarking on a great quest, or are they just setting up a time to spend twelve hours on a Saturday playing video games? For these friends, does playing video games for twelve hours on a Saturday feel like a great quest? Do these friends compliment each other with their strengths and weaknesses? Does one friend hog all the attention and dominant the friendship? Do they share their hearts or just keep things on the surface? And so on into all the questions.

It becomes apparent, when we say "a conversation between friends" there are general defined shapes on the empty canvas of what the situation could be, a "conversation" and a "friend" can't be anything we want it to be, but there are still great possibilities that we don't know about the situation. So I am doing myself a disservice, if, in my story, I am approaching a scene with "a conversation between friends" and I think, I've been doing these conversations, talking with my friends, all my life, I know what I'm talking about, and simply reproduce in our fictional scene a definition of what could be that simply depends on what has always been in our real life. We can no longer say what we've always said just because that's all we know to say.

So, because we can no longer depend on common experience to define the blank spaces of the situations of the words and phrases we use, we need a new approach. This new approach consists

of three factors. We have to see, situations and circumstances are configurations, composite structures, formed by Elements. We have to see, each Element in a situation exists at a point on a binary spectrum of possibility. And we have to see, when the Elements form the configuration, when they form the structure of the final situation, that established circumstance realizes a truth about life.

So, to see this in action, we have our blank space, our "conversation between friends."

As we ask, What could be? about this situation we are writing, we have to select the elements that will be active in its configuration.

Here are some possible elements, along their binary spectrums of possibility.

Trust….Distrust
Camradarie….Coldness
Deep things…… Surface things
Financial Similarity . . . . Financial Discrepancy
Serious . . . . Casual

So, now we can see, if we put each of these elements on a spectrum of 1 through 10, we begin to form the Deep Element inputs of possibility that will make the configuration of our situation, the situation that provides the overall image and meaning to the blank words of our starting phrase "a conversation between friends."

Trust	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Distrust
Camradarie	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Coldness
Deep Things	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Surface Things
Financial Similarity	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Financial Discrepancy
Serious	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Casual

Now, if we look at two different Element Input Arrays, by choosing the existing point along each spectrum, we can generate two very different versions of "a conversation between friends."

Version 1:

Trust	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Distrust
Camradarie	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Coldness
Deep Things	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Surface Things
Financial Similarity	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Financial Discrepancy
Serious	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Casual

Version 2:

Trust	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Distrust
Camradarie	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Coldness
Deep Things	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Surface Things
Financial Similarity	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Financial Discrepancy
Serious	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Casual

Each of these Element Input Arrays gives us a very different configuration of what happens in our situation of "a conversation between friends."

And so, instead of approaching words and phrases with a definition of what they mean from our own familiar experiences and common knowledge, and generating a situation with much the same content, by seeing words and phrases as blank spaces, by considering deep elements, input arrays, configurations, and the realized truth, by asking What could be? instead of depending on what is or what has been, in our stories we create situations full of life.

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

When I brainstorm a Deep Element Input Array, there are two kinds of Element Input Array Notation that I use. There is a Singular Notation, and a Spectrum Notation. And, while they are similar, the number grades in each method mean something slightly different.

In Singular Notation it looks like this:

Secret: 4
Ancient: 8
Transition: 7
Decision: 8
Unknown: 7

In this method, the higher the number, the stronger the presence of the element, it has more magnitude, kind of more intensity, more influence on the scene. So, here, above, with these elements in this array, the scene would have quite a strong presence of "ancient" and quite a weak presence of "secret."

Spectrum Notation would look like this:

1 ……………………… 10

Secret …4……. Common
Ancient ………8.. Modern
Transition ……7…. Status Quo
Decision ………8.. Straight Path
Unknown ……7….Known

In this method, a "low number" and its opposite "high number" fluctuate between the presence of two opposite elements. So, "Secret 4" means quite a stronger presence, magnitude, intensity, influence of "Secret" than of "Common." It does NOT mean a relatively weak presence of "Secret" as it would mean in the Singular method.

So, when you develop your Element Input Array for a particular scene, you simply have to know which method you are using.

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

So, let's see a few examples of what I mean by starting from an Element Input Array, and using that input to generate, to configure, a scene in a fictional story. In my daily writing discipline, I use photos, from the amazing photography website Unspalsh.com, as visual prompts. I find a photo, download it (they're free), drop it into Word, and write a couple hundred words about what could be happening in the photo, what the image means, etc. Recently, I've been applying Element Input Arrays to these kinds of visual prompts, trying to sharpen my skills using this method to configure scenes. Using one photo, here are two situations I wrote about it, with each scene generated from a different Element Input Array.

I'm just going to post each situation on the following pages because reading the scenes over a page break is unnecessarily awkward.

Situation 1:

Element Input Array:

Secret 7
Ancient 8
Transition 9
Decision 8
Unknown 7

I use this route when I fish the shallows, which I've done about three days a week, for the last five years. It's an interesting rock shape, isn't it? In a rare, old dusty book that my grandfather left me, it says that, in a land before time, this was the entrance to the palace of a mad sea god. And somehow it's survived through the millennia. The book clearly describes that, if you sail through it, and say the magic phrase "storm and blood" the magic will still work, and you'll be teleported to the ancient world, where the old gods still reign. And of course, that's nonsense, right? That's a child's tale, who still believes in wondrous things, before they've grown up and taken their place in the real world, in the real struggle, in the real grind, just to pay the bills. But...what if it is true? The divorce was settled two weeks ago. And with all of that trauma, and argument, and pain, I'd love to walk away from reality. I'd love to walk into an adventure of treasure and storms and monsters and courage and glory. So, I've been thinking about these rocks. And I've been thinking about going from here to there, and my adult mind that lives in the office and settles for bad coffee every day tells me I'm being silly. But my wounded heart tells me the office and bad coffee and television aren't enough to get me through this, and I need something magnificent. I need the chaos of a mad god to spark my heart back to life and give me something to live for. So, I'm sitting here in my boat, and I'm pondering this ancient portal, and a part of me whispers of a new land, where people are free and hearts are true...but then another part of me reminds me, if it doesn't work, if I simply sail under the rock, if I only move from one side of this water to the other side of this water, then that would be another dream dead, another wonder killed by cold reasoning, another fantastic place that definitely doesn't exist...and I don't know if I could handle that.

Situation 2:

This is the swimming spot for all the cool kids. And, when you're eighteen, nineteen, or twenty-three, all you really want is to be cool. So we move out here, into the deep end, into the waves, out here by the Gate. It's that shape in the rocks. All the sailors will tell you it doesn't mean anything. There's nothing magical about it. Why would rocks be magical? What a childish thing to say. I guess when you really become an adult you forget all the important things in life. We know, that, if you swim through the Gate, you'll awaken the whirlpool on the other side, the current will sweep you into the wild waves, and you'll be sucked down to a watery grave. We've all known that's how this works since I was in the second grade. So, no one has ever swum through the Gate, because all of us really like breathing. But, here's the question. Here's my problem. I think, I'm pretty sure, I'm falling in love with Sally, and, I don't have a chance. She's hot, popular, and very clever, and I'm a nerd. I have a much better chance getting a date with a calculator, and that's not even a person. So, I have to do something to stand out. I have to get her notice me in an admirable way. I have to step forward and separate myself as a man from the boys. So, I think I have to take a risk on this Gate, and swim into the whirlpool of death, and ride it like a tornado at a rodeo, and show her what I'm worth. And show her my strength. And show her I'm more than the shy kid who spends his lunch hour in the library. I've never done anything like this. But I think today will be the day. I'm pretty sure. I just have to wait for the exact right moment. And then it's all in for a glorious future.

Element Input Array:

Secret 2
Ancient 2
Transition 8
Decision 8
Unknown 2

So, looking at these two situations and the writing that created them, let's ask some interesting questions, and see what is really happening here.

The photo is the visual writing prompt. That is Ground Zero for where my thinking starts. Then, getting some ideas, I establish my Element Input Array. Then, actively trying to reflect those Deep Elements, and their magnitude and influence, in a situation, I imagine and configure a situation that does so. And so the writing happens. But, all in all, this is a very general description of what is happening.

Using my imagination, I tried to create a real-world situation that was an expression of the magnitudes, of the influence of these Deep Elements. So, in Situation 1, "Secret strength 7" is reflected in the strange truths of an old, rare book. To reflect "Ancient strength 8" the shape in the rocks became a portal to a mad sea god's palace…and so on.

But this is the question we get to address. What exactly is my imagination imagining? What kind of material is it drawing upon? I knew, as I wrote that chunky paragraph, I was trying to configure a circumstance that was the expression of these Elements, but what really was I doing?

As I analyze that paragraph about a man fishing, recovering from a fresh divorce, I see I am choosing a Framework for the situation, and I am filling that framework with Features of the World.

So, in this paragraph, it is operating with a recent divorce at its center, so the situation is configured within a Framework of "enduring and addressing and dealing with heart trauma, deep pain, and the grieving of the end of an intimate relationship."

So, what are the Features of the World that I use?

1. -There is the common fishing route our main character uses.
2. -There is the shape in the rocks, which could be a portal to an ancient land, a mad god's palace.
3. -The main character has a desire to believe wondrous, old stories are true
4. -The main character recently had a divorce, and, with his pain, seeks to escape the harshness of real life…this is the central, driving force of the scene.
5. -Then we see the main character is in conflict with his civil life, his traumatic pain, and the brilliant possibility offered by the stories of the portal
6. -And finally the main character is left with the question…what if another wondrous dream…a dream like the wondrous relationship he just lost…isn't true? Could he handle the death of another dream, or is it better to not risk finding out, and simply stay with his normal life, so he can keep believing in a fantastic place?

Overall, this scene explores a person's heart, and at the end of that exploration, struggling through a situation broken by divorce and heightened by the possibility of an ancient portal, the main character faces the heavy question of whether or not he should step into the unknown, risking the life or death of another important dream.

What becomes clear is, as I practice the craft of writing stories, within a Framework, I use the Features of the World to configure a situation that *shows* the presence and influence of the Deep Elements, resulting in a situation which illuminates a truth of life.

And this is what we mean in writing when we say "show and don't tell."

And I can illustrate this further. What if I rewrote the scene of Situation 1, and just point blank told the reader what Elements were active in the scene? It could look like this:

A man, on his usual fishing trip, approached the gap in the rocks. He knew an ancient secret, that this normal rock formation was actually the portal to another world…a portal to the palace of a mad sea god. The man stared at the gap in the rocks. He had just suffered a divorce, and he was dealing with a lot of pain. He knew, he needed a new path, he needed a transition, to some place else, to a new life, a new world. He paused, and stopped fishing. Staring at the rocks, he had an important decision to make. Would he leave his broken life and step into the unknown?

This paragraph is very flat. It doesn't weave the features of the world into configuring a situation, into showing the depths of what the character is struggling with. It just tells the reader what the key ideas of the situation are. The difference here, in telling versus showing, is the difference between presenting a person with a picture of a chocolate mocha death cake, and then saying "See this cake? This cake is absolutely delicious!" or instead giving a person large, succulent piece of a chocolate mocha death cake, which they can consume, and delve into, and so discover the depths of its deliciousness. Telling a reader the active elements in a situation keeps the reader on the surface, looking at a picture, without giving them the chance to step into the depths and wonders and realities of the darkness and the light that is happening in a situation.

- -

So, next, we can ask, what aspects of a situation depend on, can demonstrate, Deep Elements?

Here is a list I have worked out.

-*People* always have a psychology. They have a heart and mind, and these are the depths of a person. In a simple example, if a person is patient and calm in a situation, or if a person is reckless and angry, those Deep Elements will result in the configuration of two very different situations.

 -*Actions*, things that people do, will always have a quality. If a student sits down at the desk in their room to study, are they focused, disciplined, and determined, or are they distracted, bored, and listless? Based on those Deep Elements, the actual studying that happens in the situation will be very different.

-*Objects*, every thing in a situation, also has a quality. Is a pen magical, or is it ordinary? If it is magical, usually there are better ways to go about it than saying, "the scholar wrote with the magical pen." Use "magical" as a Deep Element and weave the situation to show this. "The

scholar lifted the pen preparing to write upon the page, and a soft fire tingled at his fingertips." Here, "fire" and "fingertips" are Features of the World that show the presence and influence of magic. And the same approach can apply to an "ordinary" pen. "I lifted the pen to write the to-do list, and I was just going through the motions, lifting a towel to do the dishes, lifting a broom to sweep the floor, lifting the bag to take out the trash. There was no joy in this pen."

-*Environments and settings* will always have an atmosphere. What are the Deep Elements of an enchanted emerald forest? What are the Deep Elements of a living room where a mother has watched and cared for an energetic two-year-old all day?

-*People's intents* will always have a nature. This is probably the most abstract, and it probably does involve a bit of psychology. But, a rogue assassin walking into a tavern to unwind with a good drink at the end of a hard week of travel is going to have different Deep Elements than a rogue assassin walking into a tavern planning to quietly poison the oblivious castle guard who is happily playing a game of cards.

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

So, working with the philosophy of writing with words as blank spaces, means we take Elements, and configure them into situations, by choosing a Framework and filling that framework with Features of the World, ultimately making a situation that reflects and realizes a greater truth.

So, in this philosophy, writing the scenes of a fictional novel can be defined with the following statement:

As I write each scene, I configure a situation that shows and reflects and expresses the magnitude and influence of Deep Elements, by working within a dynamic Framework, and within that Framework telling the reader about and arranging and weaving together Features of the World in an interesting, compelling, engaging, revealing way, that reflects and realizes an overall truth of life, death, light, darkness, survival, flourishing, or existence.

Just for a few more examples, here are two situations for a "conversation between friends."

Situation 1

Unsplash.com
Photo by Alexander Mass

My dude! Yesterday was awesome! I honestly can't think of a better way to spend a Saturday than with ten hours of Minecraft! Let me just say your house is looking splendid, and the addition of the red and white carpet was the perfect touch. I especially like how you coordinated it with the roses on the tables on the second floor. A part of me thinks you should get really ambitious, and add a roof patio with a glass ceiling. That would be so amazing! I might even make it a screenshot on my desktop. Right now my desktop is that one time I very deliberately, and sneakily, and stealthy dropped a bucket of lava on Bob. No, he clearly didn't appreciate it, he just has no sense of humor, because the rest of us laughed so hard. And, I mean, we are friends after all, a little joke here and there doesn't hurt anything, and after that I did give him a full suit of diamond armor, just in case there were any left-over hard feelings or grudges. Have I mentioned I have twenty-seven stacks of diamond? It's basically my life calling. This is the endeavor to which I devote all my daily hours, besides also building my castle, and hunting for lost mines. My castle is looking great by the way, after we called it last night I kept going for a few hours and finished the tower on the west wall, and let me just say, it's a total work of art, the intricate patterns of the textures are quite something to behold. Maybe we can jump back in sometime today and I can show you. Trust me, your mind will be blown. Right out your ears. We are so fortunate to have this world of Minecraft in our lives. I can't imagine what I would do without such great and awesome purpose.

Element Input Array

Fun 2……Purpose
Civil 2…….Valor
Enjoyment 2…….Impact
Happy 2…….Enriching
Surface 2………Deep

Situation 2:

Ah, my dear friend, it has been too long. How go your endeavors as the Keeper of the Shimmering Dawn Way? Last I was aware, you were struggling to decipher the midnight languages of the lost kingdom. There was quite a bit at stake, a book had been discovered, the Tome of the Fabric of the Universe, and as you explained it to me, if that text could be read, if its meaning could be captured and its words expressed as real truths, as active, living features and circumstances of our reality, then human life would be lifted to the next level, a new dawn would arrive, you and your associates would be heralds of a new tomorrow, an entirely new age of flourishing. We would truly begin to see what it looked like to have heaven on earth. I am certain you have faced a severe trial and demand. The history of the lost kingdom is complex, and controversial, and some would say lost in myth and folk legends. So, I truly encourage you to endeavor in pursuit of your vision. Delve into the depths. Make the long journey. Hold true to the way through the shadows. The fact that we even have this tome is impressive, and one day we will know what it says, and that breakthrough will happen on the investment of your dedication to this high purpose. And then, humankind will walk forward from the shadows of its broken past, from the empty toil of the civil routine, from the conflict of torn relationships and twisted love, and the light will dawn upon us. And at last, we will know true life. So, continue to endeavor. It is a long journey, but all your hours in the quiet night, all the strain of your mind, all the devotion of your heart, bring us many steps closer to the brilliant truth.

Element Input Array:

Fun……….8 Purpose
Civil……….8 Valor
Enjoyment………8 Impact
Happy………8 Enriched
Surface………8 Deep

And, as a starting point, to look at the tip of the iceberg of possible Deep Elements, here's a list I brainstormed, in Spectrum Notation. In this list, I was thinking mostly of psychological Elements.

1. Hate……Value
2. Love……Apathy
3. Comfort….Risk
4. Arrogance….Humility
5. Dignity……Humiliation
6. Majesty……Degradation
7. Common….Special
8. Elite……Regular
9. Normal….Abnormal
10. Peace……Disruption
11. Tranquility….Madness
12. Order……Chaos
13. Safe……Fearful
14. Trusting….Distrusting
15. Deep……Shallow
16. Mature……Immature
17. Respectful…...Disrespectful
18. Honest……Dishonest
19. Esteemed….Shamed
20. Accepted……Rejected
21. Worthy……Worthless
22. Passionate….Cold
23. Exciting…….Mundane
24. Adventurous…….Routine
25. Rich……Poor
26. Full……Empty
27. Quiet…...Loud
28. Convenient…...Inconvenient
29. Candid…...Deceitful
30. Hope…...Despair
31. Sober…...Wild
32. Domestic…...Savvy
33. Creative…... Productive
34. Responsible…...Endeavoring
35. Civil…...Valorous
36. Good…...Evil
37. Light…...Darkness
38. Righteous…...Wicked
39. Holy……Blasphemous
40. Pure…...Corrupt

41. White…...Black
42. Strong…...Weak
43. Interested…...Unconcerned
44. Serious…...Casual
45. Joyful…...Sorrowful
46. Vibrant…...Broken
47. Rude…...Considerate
48. Generous…...Miserly
49. Clever…...Dull
50. Energetic…...Lethargic
51. Inspired…...Conformed
52. Focused…...Distracted
53. Explorative…Content
54. Happy…...Unhappy
55. Celebratory…...Anguished
56. Alive…...Dead
57. Mighty…...Inadequate
58. Winning…...Losing
59. Glorious…...Shattered
60. Usual…...Unusual
61. Reasonable…...Strange
62. Courageous…...Cowardly
63. Temperate…...Reckless
64. Virtuous…...Depraved
65. Altruistic…...Egotistical
66. Excellent…...Mediocre
67. Honorable…...Dishonorable
68. Honoring…...Contemptuous
69. Equal…...Superior
70. Uplifting…...Demeaning
71. Serene…...Riotous
72. Appropriate…...Inappropriate
73. Shrewd…...Simple
74. Complex…...Basic
75. Harmonious…Fragmented
76. Sweet…...Sour
77. Flowing…...Disjointed
78. Commanding…...Flimsy
79. Studious…...Thrill-seeking
80. Scholarly…...laborious

81. Brainy…...Brawny
82. Beautiful…...Ugly
83. Splendid…...Cheap
84. Exquisite…...Tattered
85. Mysterious…...Boring
86. Growing…...Stagnant
87. Becoming…...Deteriorating
88. Golden…...Tarnished
89. Brilliant…...Fading
90. Determined…...Relaxed
91. Devoted…...Nonchalant
92. Calm…...Stressed
93. Ancient…...Modern
94. Organic…...Robotic
95. Large…...Small
96. Significant…...Insignificant
97. Cultivated…...Traumatized
98. Musical…...Clumsy
99. Romantic…...Stone
100. Clear…...Convoluted
101. True…...False
102. Real…...Illusion
103. Purposeful……Task-oriented
104. Appetectual……Exertive