

HOW TO WRITE NOVELS THAT SELL

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THE NUTS & BOLTS OF CHARACTERIZATION

"Most people read fiction not so much for plot as for company."

- Josip Novakovich

Readers of popular fiction want to suspend their disbelief. They want to imagine, just for a moment, that something better or different exists beyond the daily routine. When they sit down with a mystery, romance, thriller, fantasy, western, or some other form of fiction, they expect to don the “skin” of your characters.

Thus, a good novel serves two purposes: it will let a reader meet someone and get to know him in depth, or it will let the reader meet himself in disguise so he can vicariously live out his passion. Writer William Sloan says reader expectations boil down to this: “Tell me about me. I want to be more alive. Give me me.”

ARE YOU A PLOT WRITER...

If you are a plot writer, your storyline drives your novel, and the characters’ motivations, conflicts, and goals are derived from the escalating action in each scene. For instance, you might construct a character for the specific purpose of providing a “red herring” in the book.

Some Characteristics of a Plot Writer:

- You tend to frame your story ideas before you create people to live them out.
- You limit passages of introspection or “internal narration” and concentrate on action.
- You let your story “shape” your characters; in other words, your plot determines what the characters think and say, and how they behave.
- You can probably pull a character out of a scene and insert another character in its place without a great deal of rewriting, because the action is more important

...OR ARE YOU A CHARACTER WRITER?

For character writers, the protagonist's/antagonist's inner conflicts, motivations, and goals determine the plot. Each scene stems from the behaviors of the characters. To these writers, characters often take on lives of their own, dictating the course of the novel. Thus, the stories seem to write themselves.

Some Characteristics of a Character Writer:

- You envision characters first and try to develop a storyline that will challenge them and make them grow.
- You explore the emotional and psychological make-up of your characters through introspective passages, exposing their goals and motivations to the reader.
- Your plot sometimes changes in mid-stream because your characters “tell you” they would never behave the way you are “forcing” them to behave.
- If you try to pull Character “A” out of a scene, you face a significant rewrite, because the scene evolved from the motivations and behaviors of Character “A”. Character “B” is not likely to behave the same way.

WHICH WAY IS BEST?

"Character is plot, plot is character."

- F. Scott Fitzgerald

The plot of your novel can evolve out of your characterization. However, a character will not necessarily evolve out of your plot. My philosophy is this: if character matters so much to the reader, it must matter even more to the writer.

Although I started out as a plot writer, I couldn't sell a book until I learned to create interesting, complex, and believable characters. In the words of literary agent Ethan Ellenberg, “If you move people emotionally, you sell books.” (*US News & World Report*, Nov. 6, 1995)

GIVE YOUR READERS WHAT THEY WANT

What do readers want?

I asked this question of avid fiction readers. The following answers summarize the results of my informal Internet poll:

“I read very much for character, although with historical (novels), I stick to a few favorite time periods.”

“Whether or not I stick with a book depends entirely upon whether or not the author gives me a compelling character.”

“Lack of characterization loses the reader. The writer can’t expect me to keep reading simply because there’s an implied promise of (romance, suspense, action, etc.) coming around the bend.”

ROUND AND FLAT CHARACTERS

“The personages in a tale shall be alive, except in the case of corpses. The reader shall be able to tell the corpses from the other.”

- Mark Twain

Round characters have three dimensions. They are memorable because they are complex. Conflicting personality traits make them interesting. They have a full range of emotions; thus, they are able to move the reader in some way. Think of Scarlett O’Hara in Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*. You may not have liked Scarlett. You may have wanted to throttle her, in fact. But you were mesmerized by her. In my mind, Scarlett epitomizes the definition of “compelling character” because right or wrong, good or bad, you wanted to know what she would do next.

Good characters aren’t black and white. In real life, no person is completely good or bad, beautiful or ugly, stupid or genius, etc. People have motivations (ie, “reasons” or “rationales”) for what they do. Usually, these motivations stem from their values or their belief systems.

Your job as a writer is to show the reader why your characters do what they do, even if that behavior is heinous. For instance, you may have thought Scarlett O'Hara (*Gone with the Wind*) was cruel to woo her sister's beau and marry him, since Scarlett had no love for the man; however, Margaret Mitchell clearly showed that Scarlett was trying to protect herself and her family. (Remember the famous scene when Scarlett vows, "As God is my witness, I shall never go hungry again?" This is one of Scarlett's primary motivations.)

Flat characters have few personality traits. The traits that they do have are predictable or "stereotypical:" the doughnut-eating cop, the shifty-eyed thief, the anorexic model, etc.

Sometimes "prefab characters" are useful, even desirable. (See the section on secondary characters for tips on using stereotypes.) However, you *never* want your protagonist (also called your "main character") to be stereotypical. As soon as readers start predicting the plot twists in your story, they'll become bored and close your book. So if you want to paint the portrait of a miser, for instance, be sure to "flesh him out" with a myriad of other weaknesses, strengths, goals, dreams, and fears.

THE PROTAGONIST

"When writing a novel, a writer should create living people (not) characters. A character is a caricature."

- Ernest Hemingway

The protagonist is the main character in your book. Readers must identify with it to be satisfied by the story. An author's goal is to create protagonists that make the reader want to read to the end of the book and then recommend it to friends.

"...Your story (must be) derived from the protagonists' goals and motivations. If this character is not deeply and consistently developed, if he is not inspirational and credible, to the reader, or if he lacks heroic qualities - the reader will not care (about your story)."

- Leslie Kellas Payne, *Editor of Adult Fiction*

Why won't your reader care? Because your reader has accepted your invitation to live inside the skin of your character. Throughout the book, your reader "becomes" your protagonist (or the character who has the viewpoint in any given scene). The reader is looking for a vicarious experience. However, no reader wants to continue "being" a character that he doesn't like, accept, or at least understand.

The reader of mainstream and genre fiction expects certain qualities in the protagonist: for instance, that the protagonist will be worthy of admiration and respect, that he will be a role model or an inspiration. Literary fiction is different. The readers of literary fiction have other expectations and standards. For instance, they are willing to embrace depression for hundreds of pages. Be aware that your reader, the reader of popular fiction, is not willing to do so. He wants to read for escape, relief, or hope.

MAKE PROTAGONISTS LARGER THAN LIFE

Readers of popular fiction want their heroes and heroines to be inspiring; they want characters that are role models or larger than life. Readers want to see these characters be especially competent in some area (example: the stuttering receptionist who is endowed with a special gift for song.)

In contrast, beginning writers often think they need to create characters that are "true to life." The trouble is, characters have to be logical and consistent in their actions. Real people don't. Real people can change their minds on a whim; they can be lazy one afternoon and ambitious the next; they can be cranky, emotional, or erratic for no identifiable reason. If you were to paint a fictional character this way, you would confuse your reader. And the minute you confuse your reader, you've lost him.

The great irony in fiction is that a sense of reality is achieved through illusion. In other words, your characters only have to *appear* to be real. To create characters that appear real, consistency is critical. However, this does not mean characters won't evolve throughout the story; readers expect them to. "The happiest reading experience," Leslie Kellas Payne says, "is provided when the protagonist experiences life, learns, changes and grows." But the character must grow in ways that are both emotionally and logically credible to the reader (within the parameters of your story.)

The way to achieve consistent, logical character growth is to be sure that your character's every thought, word, and deed is clearly motivated.

GOAL, MOTIVATION, AND CONFLICT

If you remember nothing else about characterization, remember this:
Your main character (and your major “secondary” characters) must have identifiable goals, motivations, and conflicts.

Characters must grow and change; thus, their motives and goals will too.

Character Motivations

In order to hook your reader and keep him turning pages, your characters must be:

- Complex
- Interesting and/or
- Memorable

Thus, as the writer, you should be intimately aware of every character’s motives. Motivation is the driving force that propels your characters through your story. In other words, motivation is the plausible reason for your characters’ behavior. It is the cause behind the effect.

Emotion equals motivation. Or, if you prefer: Caring is the ultimate motivation.

Example: if you are deeply worried about your sick child and need additional income to pay his doctor bills, you might be driven to ask your boss for a raise. Or to get a second job. Or to rob a bank. Your motivation is to care for your sick child. Your goal is to find a solution to your money shortage.

A character’s goal is determined by his motivation.

Character Goals

Every protagonist will have an overall story goal. In a romance, it will be to find true love. In a mystery, it will be to solve the murder. In a western, it might be to bring the outlaws to justice. *Your book is finished when the protagonist accomplishes his story goal.* This means, for instance, that if your characters find true love on page 210 of a romance, your book should end by page 220. Don’t give your reader 40 additional pages about how the hero saves the farm. Your reader doesn’t care. Romance readers buy love stories to see how the couple in the book overcomes tremendous odds to forming a satisfying, long-term monogamous relationship (one that preferably leads to marriage.)

By the same token, once the crime is solved, your mystery readers won't be interested in two more chapters that tell how your detective gets promoted, proposes to his sweetheart, and makes love to her sixteen times during their honeymoon. Genre readers have specific expectations. Don't disappoint them if you want them to read your next novel.

Of course, in order for your protagonist to accomplish his story goal in a genre novel, he must first live through a series of "scenes." In each of these scenes, your protagonist must have an identifiable goal, *even if that goal changes or is not accomplished by the end of that scene.*

Example:

Your protagonist may be having a chocolate craving (*motivation #1*), so he decides to drive to the convenience store to buy a candy bar (*goal #1*), even though he's a diabetic and knows that he shouldn't. But on his way to the store, he's rear-ended. Worried about the extent of the damage to his car (*motivation #2*), your protagonist decides to pull off the road (*goal #2*.) He expects the other motorist to do the same. Instead, the other driver speeds away into traffic. Angered that he is the victim of a hit-and-run, (*motivation #3*), your protagonist jumps back in the car to follow the driver and have him punished. (*goal #3 & #4.*)

As you can see in the above example, the protagonist never did buy a candy bar. However, the reader won't mind this goal-change because you've shown a clear and compelling reason for the protagonist to forget his chocolate craving.

Your characters should be so well-developed, that in every situation, the reasons behind their actions are clear, consistent and convincing.

Keep in mind that your characters' goals will always be different from your goals as the author. For instance, you can't pit your character against a hurricane just because you've decided your book needs a change of pace. All scenes must result logically from some decision that your protagonist made in the previous scene (for a more detailed explanation, see the chapter on "Plotting: Scene and Sequel").

Here is an example to illustrate the difference between author goal and protagonist goal:

In chapter two, you want to introduce the villain. In order to do this, you decide to create a suspenseful scene in which your protagonist “sees” the villain. Thus, you create a passage in which your hero and villain appear on stage at the same time. You have to give your protagonist some logical reason for being on the scene, so you decide to have him drive to the heroine’s house to leave a package in her mailbox. When the hero arrives, he spies a shadowy figure lurking in her bushes. Thus, your *character’s* scene goal is to deliver a package. Your scene goal as the *author* is to cue the reader that the heroine is in danger from some other character in the book.

Character Conflicts

In order to keep your reader interested in your story, you must weave conflict into every scene of your book. To create conflict in each scene, your character *must* have an obstacle that keeps him from obtaining his scene goal. There are several traditional sources of conflict (obstacles) in fiction:

- Man against Man
- Man against Himself
- Man against Nature/the Elements
- Man against Society
- Man against Machine
- Man against God
- God against Everybody

The majority of these conflicts are considered *External Conflicts*; in other words, they come from sources outside the protagonist, such as weather, traffic, cultural taboos, technology, a villain, etc. “Man against Himself,” however, is considered *Internal Conflict*. Internal conflict stems from a character’s belief systems, values, and fears.

For examples, let’s return to our hit-and-run scene. Here’s how the requisite elements of characterization break down in this scene:

<i>Goal:</i>	Chocolate
<i>Motivation:</i>	Appetite/craving
<i>External Conflict:</i>	Hit-and-run driver
<i>Internal Conflict:</i>	Guilt/Worry about his diabetic condition

“Naming your characters Aristotle and Plato is not going to make their relationship interesting unless you make it so on the page.”

- Annie Dillard

THINGS TO REMEMBER ABOUT CONFLICT

- Conflict arises from divergent goals
- Emphasize the strength of the opposition. (ie, show that your protagonist has a slim chance of achieving his goal)
- Create a logical yet unanticipated disaster to throw at your character (ie, the hit-and-run driver)
- Strengthen your story (ie, make it more interesting for your reader) by giving your protagonist at least one internal and one external conflict *per scene*.

WAYS TO REVEAL PERSONALITY TRAITS

When introducing a character for the first time, new writers often try to describe everything they know about that character in the first scene. This problem is called “background dumping” and should be avoided. Even though you know your protagonist inside and out, you have to be judicious when deciding how much information you reveal. Not only that, you have to reveal this information bit by bit. (Call this strategy the “Gypsy Rose Lee” Rule of Characterization.)

The Iceberg Analogy

As you write, remember the Iceberg Analogy. In other words, while tons of good, weighty character material lurks under the water, your reader only gets to see the “tip” of the iceberg. Why? Because most of your hero’s past/background doesn’t move your plot forward. You created your treasure trove of knowledge about his parents, his childhood diseases, his first love, his worst nightmare, etc., only so that you’ll know how he will behave in the situations that may arise (and surprise you!) in your plot.

Readers *are* interested, however, in how your protagonist *feels* about the dilemmas you’ve given him. Readers want to live vicariously through your protagonist, experiencing what he sees, hears, smells, tastes, and feels. Thus, a good writer draws a reader deep into a protagonist’s persona by writing through the five senses.

Write Through Your Five Senses

If you write through the five senses, weaving phrases periodically into each scene to give your reader vivid impressions of the character’s environment, thoughts, moods, and reactions, your writing will be stronger. To put it another way: “show” your reader what’s happening to the characters in your story; don’t “tell” him about it. “Telling” is boring. “Showing” is engaging, even titillating. Remember: when you move readers emotionally, you sell books.

Example of “telling”

Angry and frustrated, Ted had trouble catching his breath as he hurried across the airport lobby. Some of his luggage had been lost, and he'd been delayed for his trial by filing a claim in the baggage office. To make matters worse, public transportation was being cancelled because of the storm. He didn't think he'd be able to find a taxi. In the end, he managed to find one, but his pants got wet and had to pay the driver an inflated fare.

Example of “showing”

Idiot! Huffing as he trotted from the baggage claim, Ted cursed the handler who'd somehow rerouted his golf clubs to Cuba. Not that he would have been able to play much, he grumbled as he juggled his umbrella and trenchcoat, freeing a beefy finger to stab the buttons of his cell phone. Lightning spat over the atrium roof; palm trees whipped back and forth across the pea-green sky. *Damn.*

Perspiring now, Ted loosened his Dior tie and tried another number, squinting through his bifocals at the rain that sluiced along the plexiglass. The loud speakers in the terminal crackled with yet another flight cancellation, and he scowled, barely able to hear the busy signal in his receiver. He checked his Rolex. *Forty minutes late! If the hurricane doesn't kill me, the District Attorney will.*

Jostling his way past Mickey Mouse T-shirts and drooping Sea World pennants, Ted navigated his girth through the tourists crowding the revolving doors. When he reached the other side, he fumbled in his suitcoat for his inhaler. The asthma medicine was more of a precaution than a necessity, although the stench of diesel did make him wheeze.

Meanwhile, porters herded grumbling businessmen back from the hotel shuttles. The *Hertz* and *Avis* courtesy buses also turned away passengers due to the storm. Ted's head pounded. Surely the cabbies were made of sterner stuff! This was Miami, after all.

As if to confirm his reasoning, he spied headlights slashing toward him through the soup. Sheets of falling water made the black and white checkers of the cab dance like an optical illusion, but the sparsely-toothed grin that flashed through the window looked real enough. Ted was almost relieved.

“Where to, señor?”

He choked on his answer. Propped against a St. Christopher icon that had been nailed to the dash, a hand-scrawled scrap of cardboard read: *“Hurycane Andy rate: \$5.00 per mile.”*

Example of “showing” (cont)

Muttering another oath, Ted dived inside, slammed the door, and barked, “Courthouse.” The taxi lurched forward, and he slid across the seat, wetting his custom-tailored pinstripes in the puddle that had been left by the previous fare.

If you review the previous example of “Showing,” you’ll see that dialogue, action, reaction, and physical characteristics were used to paint a real-life persona for Ted and the cab driver. When creating your own characters, sprinkle the following character traits *lightly* throughout your prose.

Dialogue:

- Speech patterns
- Dialect/Slang
- Idiomatic expressions (The way Gomer Pyle says, “Golly”)

Action:

- Physical gestures
- Facial expressions
- Habits
- Lifestyles (including religious and socio-economic backgrounds, hobbies, profession, etc.)
- Idiosyncracies (Example: constantly twisting a strand of hair around her finger)
- Quirks (Example: he likes tuna fish on his pizza)

Reactions to Other Characters & to Circumstances:

- Introspection
- Internal dialogue
- Behaviors
- Attitudes and moods

Physical Appearance:

- Age
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Scars and/or handicaps
- Clothing
- Personal belongings
- Home and/or work environment

SECONDARY CHARACTERS

Every secondary character in your book (like every scene in your book) must serve a purpose. Often, major secondary characters (sidekicks/confidantes and villains) act as catalysts to advance the plot. In addition, they are usually linked to your subplots. The main function of the secondary character is to help reveal the personality or motivation of the protagonist. The secondaries accomplish this by representing information or obstacles that trigger a reaction from the protagonist.

If your secondary characters do not move the plot forward, reveal unknown information about your main characters, or reveal key conflicts in your story, they have no business being in your book.

Secondaries should be memorable without being overpowering. (Remember: it's the protagonist's story.) They should also be believable, vulnerable, and flawed (often more flawed than the protagonist.) If they are not believable, complex, or memorable, determine how you can combine them.

Major Secondary Characters Should:

- Be well-rounded and fully developed
- React and speak differently (ie, have individuality)
- Experience growth (but not as much as the protagonist)
- Have their own identity (which is still subordinate to the protagonist)
- Have some importance in the story (example: an eccentric relative for humor)

They can occasionally be given the point-of-view in a scene. Warning: if you get your reader emotionally involved in a secondary character -- and the chance of that is high if you give that character the scene's point-of-view -- you run the risk of making that character more empathetic/interesting than your protagonist. Again, remember whose story you are telling.

Minor Secondary Characters Are:

- Not as well-developed. They serve as walk-ons (example: a waitress) or plot devices
- Stereotypes. As stereotypes, they will elicit a preconditioned response from the reader. Thus, they can be used to sketch a character quickly.
- Rarely given the point-of-view in a scene.

SOURCES OF CHARACTERS

You can base your characters on real people, or you can use psychological types or archetypes. Keep in mind, however, that effective (ie, compelling) fictional characters display a consistent individuality. In other words, you may need to draw from several or all of the following sources to make your characters interesting and complex:

- Psychology Books
- Astrology
- The Bible
- Mythical Archetypes
- Your Imagination
- Real People

“Of course I base my characters partly on the people I know - one can’t escape it - but fictional characters...are much less complex than the people one knows.”

- Aldous Huxley

Secondary characters can be found in your protagonist’s:

- Job environment
- Family
- Neighborhood
- Pets
- Dreams, Nighmares, or Imagination (ie, otherworldly creatures)

Remember to give your fictional creations real passions. These goals, motivations, and conflicts will define your characters and shape the plot of your book.

GET INSIDE YOUR CHARACTERS' HEADS

In genre fiction, stories are typically written in a narrative style that is called “limited third person” point of view (POV). This style consists of jumping inside the “head” of your characters and writing through their eyes - as well as their ears, nose, taste buds, fingertips, thoughts, and emotions. In other words, only the sensory impressions of the viewpoint character are available to the reader, hence the term, “limited third person.” This POV is popular because it helps the writer construct multiple human beings with believable fears, doubts, joys, and opinions (like the rest of us.)

Limited third person POV is one of the most common narratives used in genre fiction. Alternative POVs include first-person, omniscient third-person, and second person.

First Person:

First-person POV is similar to the way you talk or write a letter; in fact, most novelized letters and journal entries are written in the first person. It is a highly compelling viewpoint, because it is fraught with emotion. Authors enjoy writing through the first-person, because it sharpens the story-telling experience, immersing the author in the feelings and sensory impressions of the protagonist.

Many modern-day writers of serial novels choose first-person POV. In the fantasy genre, examples include #1 New York Times Bestsellers Stephenie Meyer (*Twilight*), Jim Butcher (the Harry Dresden novels) and Patricia Briggs (the Mercy Thompson novels).

Many writers of mystery series also choose first-person POV, including bestsellers Meg Chittendon, Agatha Christie, and Conan Doyle.

The first-person viewpoint is also popular in the gothic romance genre. Victoria Holt and Mary Stewart rely upon it almost exclusively.

The biggest drawback to this POV is that readers get only one perspective throughout the book (unless, of course, you write through multiple protagonists,

giving each one a voice. A good example: Victoria Holt's *Shadow of the Lynx*.)

Another drawback of first-person POV comes when an author tries to create a compellingly different "character voice" book after book. That's why you find first-person POV used in so many serial novels, where the same protagonist narrates from book to book.

I have found that few Thriller novels are written in the first-person POV. I suspect that writing an international espionage novel would be especially tough if you chose to limit the story to one person's POV: the scope of your story would be too small and its plot would lose momentum.

Other than the Gothic sub-genre mentioned earlier, first-person POV is rarely chosen for Romance novels. I can't speak for Romance authors as a whole, but I find first person POV daunting when trying to write sexual tension and love scenes. I need the distance provided by the limited third person POV to write about anything as intimate as sexual intercourse. Of course, your first-person POV should be different from your personal viewpoint as the author, because you are writing about a fictional persona, not penning an autobiography. Most readers will understand this difference, although there will always be those few who are tempted to think, "Hmm. Does this passage reflect what the author really feels/thinks?" (Then again, readers ask these questions when reading limited third-person POV, too.)

Omniscient Third Person Viewpoint:

This approach can be likened to a camera as it pans the scene. Thus, it's primarily a visual approach (as opposed to an approach that capitalizes on input from all of the five senses.) In this POV, the narrator knows everything about every character, but since the narrator is not *inside the head* of any character, omniscient POV lacks emotion. *Remember: when you move people emotionally, you sell books.*

Second Person Viewpoint:

I rarely see this POV used in genre fiction; it's too unwieldy. In this style, the author pretends he is talking to someone, but the "you" being addressed is not the reader. A less unwieldy outlet for second person POV comes in the form of instruction manuals or nonfiction "how-to" publications. (Example: "You adjust your VCR's clock by pressing the time/date button...")

AVOID “HEAD JUMPING”

When choosing the limited third-person POV, a lot of new writers get tangled up in POV shifts. Also called, “head jumping,” frequent POV shifts can irritate (not to mention confuse) readers and turn-off editors. For this reason, I urge you to avoid more than one head-jump per scene.

You may say, “Yes, but XYZ best-selling author jumps heads every other paragraph.”

My response? “That may be true, but XYZ has a huge following. That’s why editors let her get away with sloppy writing.”

And that’s exactly what head-jumping is, folks: sloppy writing. More forethought and skill are required to reveal the thoughts and feelings of a character from the viewpoint of *another* character.

For instance, in limited third person POV -- and especially in first person POV -- your protagonist can only draw conclusions about the antagonist based on body language, vocal inflection, facial expressions, behavior, and hearsay (examples: gossip, news reports, etc.) The protagonist (and therefore, the reader) can’t ever really know what’s going on inside the antagonist’s mind. And believe me, this limitation can be great fun if you deliberately want to mislead your reader.

Your viewpoint character shares his opinions, emotions, and sensory impressions with the reader.

If you’re writing from Bob’s POV, you know you’ve jumped heads the minute Aunt Janie starts thinking about the clumps of red dirt on her garden tools, or little Amanda smells the chocolate aroma of her birthday cake.

How do you relay to the reader what Aunt Janie thinks and little Amanda smells? Utilize something called a virtual POV shift. This technique consists of “distancing words,”

such as “apparently,” “seems to be,” “rather like,” “clearly,” etc. It also consists of sensory information (body language, dialogue, facial expressions, gestures, etc.) as perceived by your protagonist.

Examples:

Aunt Janie’s POV:

He really should know better than to leave his smelly gardening gloves on my kitchen table.

Bob’s POV:

Aunt Janie emitted a small cry of alarm as she spied the dirt-encrusted gardening gloves that Uncle John had tossed so carelessly beside her Ming-vase and its bouquet of silver tea roses. Wrinkling her nose and making a “tsking” sound, she picked up the gloves the way one might have picked up a steaming cow patty. Uncle John must not have thought as highly of antiques and tea roses as Janie did. Either that, or he was trying to needle her again.

In the above example, “must not have” is a distancing phrase. Use such phrases sparingly, because the following example would cause eye-rolling among even the most loyal of fans:

Overuse of Distancing Phrases:

Aunt Janie emitted a small cry as she *apparently* spied the dirt-encrusted gardening tools that Uncle John *must have* tossed beside her Ming vase and its bouquet of silver tea roses. Wrinkling her nose and making a “tsking” sound, she picked up the gloves *in a way which best resembled how a person might have* picked up a steaming cow patty. Uncle John *obviously* didn’t think as highly of antiques and tea roses as Janie *assuredly* did. Either that, or he was *probably* doing his best to needle her again.

In the above example, the distancing words (italicized for the purpose of this illustration) indicate that Bob, our narrator, is drawing conclusions based on his current observations and his familiarity with the relationship between Janie and John. However, the qualifiers aren’t necessary. Since we know we’re in Bob’s

POV, we know all conclusions drawn in this scene are his. Moreover, we know they're strictly *his opinion*. He could be mistaken: Aunt Janie might not be annoyed about the gloves; she might be disgusted about the cockroach that Bob didn't see crawling inside one of the gloves. But we'll never know the truth unless Aunt Janie speaks up...or you, the author, jump us into her head.

More Rules about POV:

- Establish the pattern early and remain consistent. In other words, if you're going to jump heads once per scene in Chapter One, don't jump in every other paragraph as you write Chapter 12.
- When starting a new POV, always start new paragraphs or new scenes.
- When choosing who should be your viewpoint character, always choose the character who has the most to lose in the scene. In other ones, the character with the strongest emotional conflict, the one who's the most vulnerable. You'll hook your reader more easily and quickly.
- In a romance, reserve your POV for the hero and heroine. Avoid giving viewpoints to secondary characters. In a romance, readers want to know what's happening in the minds and hearts of the two people in romantic conflict. Your reader really doesn't care what the housekeeper or sidekick thinks.
- Avoid the talking head, the character who has no other function in the scene than to relay information to the protagonist. If you have a secondary character who must perform this role, give the character some meat; flesh him out and make him as real as possible...without jumping into his head.
- Omniscient narrative weakens your prose. Once you leave the character's head, you leave behind his emotion, too.
- When well-done, some POV shifts can be effective. In other words, there are always exceptions to the rule. But be sure you've mastered the rules before you break them!

THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES

Ever hear of the book, *Men are from Mars; Women are from Venus*, by John Gray, Ph.D.? That title pretty much says it all. Men and women do not think alike. You, being either one or the other, already know this fact. However, you may have trouble *writing* it.

The following section will give you some insights on how to create “real men” and “real women” in your fiction.

Note: The following illustrations of male/female behavior are generalities, and except where noted, I am illustrating Alpha Male and Beta Female personality types. When creating characterizations, avoid stereotypes bordering on "extreme" yin/yang personality traits. As in real life, no believable character can be totally evil, stupid, heroic, perfect, invincible, etc. You must craft well-rounded Protagonists, Sidekicks, and Antagonists, who are complex, compelling, and memorable.

Communications Patterns

When creating passages of internal dialogue (thinking) and external dialogue (speech) for your male and female characters, keep in mind that men and women think, act, and express themselves differently.

Because women are physically weaker than men, women have been forced throughout history to express themselves in indirect or diplomatic ways to prevent beatings — or worse — by offended male protectors. Although many women have evolved beyond this stereotype, a significant portion of the female population still believes that they are more "ladylike" if they speak softly and act demurely.

For instance, I've heard both men and women describe bold career women as "aggressive," "pushy," and "brassy" while men who behave similarly are described as "sharp," "tough," or "assertive." The connotations are vastly different.

Due to socialization, women may ask for what they want in a round-about way, rather than speaking frankly. (Examples: "I think I might like to see a movie tonight," she said. "Would you be too tired to see a movie tonight?" she asked.)

Men, on the other hand, speak directly, even bluntly. They use the imperative. ("I want to go to the seven o'clock movie," he said, or "Let's go to the seven o'clock movie.") Of course, the Beta Male, or the Alpha who wants to keep peace in his household, may address his lover differently than he would address a male subordinate. In such cases, the male might phrase his movie question this way: "I hear that new Woody Allen movie's a hoot. Do you want to catch a show tonight?"

Men and women use different phraseology. "I might need you to pick up the kids" or "I would appreciate it if you could pick up the kids," are more likely to come out of a female's mouth. Male dialogue is rife with uses of "I am, I will, I did." (Ex: I will be late tonight. I need you to pick up the kids.)

Men don't end statements with questions, but women often do. ("That was a lovely picnic," she said. "Don't you think so?") Men aren't prone to poetic adjectives or euphemisms. "I got a great deal on a bad-ass four-wheel drive," is a male description. "Our new truck's a lovely shade of salmon with luxurious leather upholstery," is more likely to come from the female driver. "Sex was great," he said. "We made love all night long," she said.

Male and Female Psychology

To make plot conflict believable, your characters must be evenly matched, psychologically-speaking. In other words, a stronger, bolder, more aggressive female (black widow murderess) needs a stronger, bolder, more aggressive foil (wisecracking PI).

What motivates men? They take pride in knowledge. They're problem solvers. They focus on solutions. Miss Marple would never approach a murder case the way Sherlock Holmes would.

Women are consolers. They enjoy talking about problems (analyzing them) and sharing experiences – which is why Cozy Mysteries, which are read predominantly by women, give female detectives a slew of gossipy informants to talk to.

Men don't admit to problems. They're socialized to define "manly" as stoic and invulnerable – which is probably why men don't ask for driving directions or consult the instruction manual when installing electronic equipment. Can you picture Rhett Butler slamming back a shot of whiskey and asking Ashley Wilkes for advice about Scarlett O'Hara? Nope. Me neither.

Men have been socialized to take charge. They vie for position. Deeply concerned with where they stand in the pecking order, men want the respect (or fear) of other men. Can you picture Aragorn, from J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, abandoning the Fellowship of the Ring because his Elfin lover was pining for him? 'Course not. He would have been scorned by every character in the series – including Arwen (his lover). Generally speaking, men are socialized to be more concerned with what other men think than about what women think. (Sorry, ladies.)

So when you're writing an Alpha character, keep this rule of thumb in mind: Alphas compete, and Betas cooperate.

Depicting Emotion through Body Language

Ninety-five percent of communication is nonverbal. Pay attention to your character's body language and make sure it mirrors who s/he is. For instance, an Alpha Character (strong-willed, dominant, proactive) will show authority by his actions. He will interrupt, and talk more rapidly, loudly, or abrasively than the other person. He will sit while others stand; lean forward in his chair; gesture expansively; make direct eye contact.

Beta Characters (subordinates) show more passive behavior: they fidget, avert their eyes, clear their throats, make small gestures, wring their hands, nod in agreement, cross and uncross their legs, clasp hands in their laps, shrink back in their chair, etc.

Self-confident, powerful men aren't likely to sigh or giggle. They may "redden" but they rarely "blush." They may stew, but they rarely "pout". Choose your adjectives carefully.

Since our primordial ancestors first learned to walk erect, males have traditionally protected women. Women, on the other hand, are usually the first defense for children. When you're writing antagonists, a quick way to showcase the despicable or despotic nature of a character is to create a scene in which a male browbeats a female subordinate or a woman unfairly punishes a child.

Writing about Feelings

Due to social conditioning, "alpha" males feel safe exhibiting only two emotions: happiness and anger. These aggressive, dominating men believe anger makes them powerful, and that expressing any other emotion (doubt, resentment, jealousy, frustration, fear, yearning, relief, guilt, shame, etc.) is a sign of weakness. Thus, "alpha" males repress all emotions but joy and anger.

Women (and "beta" males or "sensitive" men) are more likely to exhibit nuances of emotion, such as the ones mentioned above. However, women are more likely to repress anger because they've been socialized to believe that outbursts are unladylike.

Men are less concerned with approval than with control. They want to establish dominance over other men. Obvious exception: if a man is sensitive (ie, in touch with his feelings and/or compassionate about the feelings of others) or if he lacks self-esteem, he will express himself in ways that are not openly threatening.

A woman - or man - who lacks self-confidence, or who is struggling to assert her/himself in a potentially hostile environment, may express needs/desires indirectly, diplomatically, or in passive/aggressive ways. In the negative extreme, these individuals may come across as manipulative, whiny, wishy-washy, unnecessarily strident, etc.

Characterizing Internal Dialogue

To make your men "sound" like men during introspective passages, remember that men don't participate in a lot of self-examination, self-doubt, or analysis before (or after) making a decision. (Think John Wayne here.)

Women try to take into consideration the feelings of everyone involved before taking action. Afterward, she may worry about whether she made the right choice. The exceptions, of course, are your Alpha females, Anti-Heroines, and Villainesses (example: the magazine CEO and fashionista, Amanda Priestley, from *The Devil Wears Prada*).

Final Thoughts on Characterization:

- Characters are the heart of your story. Without them, you have no plot.
- Remember the “Iceberg Principle:” You should know more about your characters than the reader will ever see.
- Remember the Gypsy Rose Lee Rule: reveal character bit by bit, saving the most interesting part for last.
- Make your characters interesting, memorable, and complex.
- Avoid stereotyped characters except as walk-ons and devices.
- Keep minor characters in their place. The important thing is how your major characters react to them.

OPENING YOUR BOOK WITH A HOOK

Think of your first chapter as the seed from which the rest of your book grows. Every conflict, obstacle, crisis and solution must sprout from Chapter One. If you cannot logically trace a subplot or situation back to something you wrote or implied in Chapter One, you've probably got a plot problem on your hands. For instance, if you don't set up early in your story that your impoverished protagonist might have wealthy relatives, your reader is going to roll his eyes when you suddenly "create" Aunt Petunia, who comes to the protagonist's rescue in Chapter 12 by dying and leaving him a generous trust fund.

Your plot must develop in a logical and consistent manner. Readers only like plausible surprises.

In a good piece of fiction, Chapter One is where the author introduces the reader to the protagonist. The author establishes the protagonist's story goal (ie, to find true love, solve the murder, conquer the aliens, etc.) In Chapter One, you will imply or introduce the overwhelming obstacles that the protagonist faces, and you will raise the crucial question: *Will the protagonist achieve his story goal?* Once this question is raised, everything else in your story relates to it.

Ways to Begin a Story

Think of the first chapter of your book as the curtain rising in a play:

- What will the reader see?
- Will the character make an entrance?
- What is the character doing?
- What is he holding?
- What is he saying?

To answer these questions, authors will call upon any number of writing devices: action, setting, dialogue, description, symbolism, sex, etc.

One caution about opening your novel with sex: it can excite some readers and tire others. In a romance, for instance, a new writer might seek to

titillate the reader by introducing the hero in the throes of passion with a whore or mistress. (Keep in mind *especially* if you are writing romance, that the majority of your readers buy these books because they want to vicariously experience the act of falling in love with a future marriage partner through the eyes of the hero and heroine. In fact, it's a hard-and-fast rule in romance that once the hero lays eyes on the heroine, he never has sexual intercourse with any other woman in the book.)

My advice to you: if you choose to open your genre novel with sexual titillation, be sure your motivation as an author goes beyond the mere act of arousing your reader. Let the sexual intercourse reveal character, pose the first significant conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist, or provide the first “disaster” that drives the plot forward. Otherwise, your potential editor will see your sexual scene for precisely what it is: a cheap trick to entice readers into turning pages.

THE NARRATIVE HOOK

The first important aspect of Chapter One is your opening line or paragraph. This opening is called the “narrative hook.”

“A narrative hook is used to describe an opening sentence, paragraph or scene. (It is) designed to be so shocking, or surprising, or eerie, or curious, or controversial, or puzzling, or scary, or in some other way so intriguing, that the reader is instantly hooked by it and dragged into the book almost against his will.”

- Dean Koontz

Either directly or indirectly, a good narrative hook will answer the five W's:

WHO: Is your protagonist present and is the reader in his viewpoint? Are we aware of the protagonist's emotional state?

Open your story in the “head” of the character who has the most to lose in the first scene. In other words, the character

that is the underdog, or who appears to be the most vulnerable. (See the section on “Viewpoint” for more information.) Choose carefully when selecting the viewpoint character for your narrative hook.

Readers become attached to the first person whose “skin” they don. If that person isn’t the main character, you run the risk of disappointing (and driving off) your readers, because they got invested in a character who isn’t the focus of your book.

WHAT: Is a change occurring in the protagonist’s life?

The rule of thumb is to open your book several minutes before the protagonist’s life will irrevocably change. Give the reader a few paragraphs that let him understand whose skin he’s stepping into. In other words, let us see this character in a stressful situation, because stress is the best way to reveal the true mettle of a character. Show us what motivates this character, what his goal is, and what’s at stake for him. Once the reader understands these things, he’s emotionally invested in an outcome. Now you can “drop the bomb” so to speak, making your character face the first obstacle to achieving both his scene *and* his story goal.

**WHERE:
& WHEN:**

Did you set the scene quickly, by giving the reader a sense of time and place?

It is important to set your scene, so the reader has a logical framework for the twists and turns he anticipates in your story. However, avoid “dumping” information here. Too often, beginning writers slave over descriptions of beautiful sunsets or magnificent alien landscapes to open their books, completely missing the point. Beautiful writing is not the goal of the narrative hook. Building an immediate, emotional rapport with the reader is.

WHY: Is the reader aware of the protagonist’s initial goal, motivation, and conflict?

While shopping for reading material, studies show that fiction readers make their decisions by skimming the back

cover first, the front teaser second, and the first page third. If the book passes all these tests, many readers open the book to some random passage in the middle to see if the book still holds their attention.

Speaking for myself (because I'm guilty of the above process,) I turn to page one to figure out what the protagonist is doing and why I should care about it. If I don't receive this information by the end of page one, I start skimming the chapter. If I haven't gleaned this information by page five, I save my hard-earned money and look for an author who knows how to "craft" a story better.

Remember: you're competing against the Internet, radio, television, movies, newspapers, video games, and a host of other "media" for your readers' attention. You don't have the luxury that writers had 150 years ago, when readers looked forward to a "slow" read. In those days, reading was one of the leisure activities available to a largely rural society.

Today's audience is accustomed to technology that lets them receive information fast. They want immediate gratification. If you don't titillate them emotionally, hooking them into the story with your presentation of the protagonist and his predicament, chances are, your readers won't finish Chapter One -- much less buy your book.

THE FIVE CATEGORIES OF “HOOKS”

Most book openings fall into five categories: unique, unanticipated, deviation (from the norm), imminent change, and inordinate detail. Below, I’ve included some examples of strong narrative hooks from genre novels.

Unique:

[Note: The following hook is unique because it opens an adult romance novel]

“Just this morning, in the Land Where Monsters Live, all the monsters were sitting down to their favorite breakfast of cornflakes and bat's wings. It had been a hard night spent frightening children and making adults turn to look when they didn't want to. So after breakfast, when people got up to work and play, the monsters would climb into their nests and snooze.”

-- *A ROSE FOR MAGGIE* by Kathleen Korb

Unanticipated:

“The small boys came early to the hanging.”

-- *PILLARS OF THE EARTH* by Ken Follett

“She had all her teeth.”

-- *CASTLES IN THE AIR* by Christina Dodd

Deviation from the Norm:

“There was a naked man pounding on Maggie Winthrop’s back door.”

-- *TIME ENOUGH FOR LOVE* by Suzanne Brockmann

“Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without presents.”

-- *LITTLE WOMEN* by Louisa May Alcott

“Lookie there, boys! The little lady ain’t got no underwears!”

-- TEXAS WILDCAT, by Adrienne deWolfe

Change is Imminent:

“He was still following her.”

-- SILVER SPLENDOR by Barbara Dawson Smith

"Where's Papa going with that ax?"

-- CHARLOTTE'S WEB by E.B. White

“A dark wave rose on the rolling sea, and from it lifted a hand.

As the wave surged higher, reaching toward sky as smoky gray as itself, the hand reached higher as well. A bracelet of foam swirled around the wrist, while desperate fingers groped for something they could not find. It was the hand of someone small. It was the hand of someone weak, too weak to fight any longer.

It was the hand of a boy.”

-- THE LOST YEARS OF MERLIN by T.A. Barron

Inordinate Detail:

“Among Lep, his mother, and his sister, Clara, the name Uzziah Botkin had always been uttered with a hush of reverence reserved elsewhere in Danfield, for President Washington, selected saints, and Almighty God Himself.”

-- PATH OF THE PALE HORSE by Paul Fleischman

“He loved the night. It spread around him a soft, comforting cloud of darkness that wrapped him in a warmth as vital to him as air and food. Daylight was a time to hide, a time to simply live through, but at night, he came alive. Blood pumped through his veins, his lungs filled with air and everything became possible, all under cover of the beneficent darkness.”

-- NIGHT OF THE PHANTOM by Anne Stuart

Inordinate Detail (cont):

“The gale tore at him and he felt its bite deep within and he knew that if they did not make landfall in three days they would all be dead. Too many deaths on this voyage, he thought, I'm Pilot-Major of a dead fleet. One ship left out of five - eight and twenty men from a crew of one hundred and seven - and now only ten can walk and the rest near death and our Captain-General one of them. No food, almost no water and what there is, brackish and foul.”

- *SHOGUN* by James Clavell

OTHER WAYS TO OPEN YOUR BOOK

Different types of story openings require you to stretch your writing muscles in a variety of ways, and this experimentation can help you find your best work pattern. Give yourself permission to try your hand at several of the techniques below, just to see if one improves the opening of your book.

There are at least eleven different “devices” for opening a story, and depending on the information revealed in the hook, these devices will fall into one of the four categories I discussed previously. You may discover even more devices as you read, paying attention to the “hooks” various authors use. However, the 11 that I have counted are:

- Setting
- Strong Sensations
- Need or Motive
- Action
- Sex
- Symbolic Object
- Character Portrait
- Question
- Travel
- Character’s Thoughts
- Prediction

Setting:

This sets the scene and raises our expectations.

Advantage: We know where we are, we can anticipate the actors.

Disadvantage: Setting isn't the strongest way to "hook" your reader, especially if it is overly long or lacking in emotional tension. Avoid falling in love with the "sound" of your words, especially in your opening paragraph.

In the example below, to avoid a lackluster opening devoid of emotion, I introduced the protagonist in the second line, working in his thoughts, before I added more environmental description. (Notice how I play with the cemetery imagery to underscore the utter despair the character is feeling.)

Example:

The cemetery was windswept and barren, a landscape of ice.

In all his fourteen years, Raphael Jones had never seen anything bleaker, not even during the war, when Jedidiah had burned furniture to keep the family warm. That year, Rafe had believed he'd never see a worse Christmas Eve.

Then yesterday Mama had died.

The ground was so frozen, the gravediggers had used axes to hack at the earth. Their torches had sputtered and hissed in the snow that had whooshed down from Kentucky's Pine Mountains. Standing alone to watch, Rafe had braved the sting of that storm, his limbs warmed by the rage that still seethed through his veins. The only part of him that could never be thawed was his heart. Finally, stripped of his last ounce of hope, he'd been forced to accept the raw truth: God didn't care about him or his prayers.

-- *SCOUNDREL FOR HIRE* by Adrienne de Wolfe

Strong Sensations:

A single strong sensation can give our imagination clear entry into the story. We don't have to start working to try to develop a complex image.

Examples:

The store in which the Justice of the Peace's court was sitting smelled of cheese.

– *BARN BURNING* by William Faulkner

1956. The air-conditioned darkness of the Avenue Theater smells of flowery pomade, sugary chocolates, cigarette smoke, and sweat.

– *DOGEATERS* by Jessica Hagedorn

Need or Motive:

Nothing propels the characters and the readers as efficiently as a definite need, and the sooner the need is identified, the better.

Example:

He loved her. That's why she'd be safer walled up in a convent. Or an island fortress. Or anywhere else he couldn't get his hands on her. And he'd be safer facing a firing squad.

Cole Callahan steeled himself against any outer sign of yearning as Lilliana stepped forward, a whiff of lavender, the rustle of silk taffeta. Her eyes lit like amber stars when she spied him, and a touch of color warmed her too-pale face. Even in widow's weeds, she was hauntingly beautiful.

– *RENEGADE HEART* (working title) by Adrienne deWolfe

Action:

Minus character emotion, an action opening -- even in the midst of a war scene -- runs the risk of disinteresting the reader. The reader needs to know why he or she should care.

Example:

The pass was high and wide and he jumped for it, feeling it slap flatly against his hands, as he shook his hips to throw off the halfback who was diving at him.

– *THE EIGHTY-YARD RUN* by Irwin Shaw

Sex:

Warning: sexual openings can excite some readers and tire others.

Example:

After I became a prostitute, I had to deal with penises of every imaginable shape and size. Some large, others quite shriveled and pendulous of testicle.

– *SLAVES OF NEW YORK* by Tama Janowitz

Symbolic Object:

If done well, a symbolic opening might raise enough questions to pique your reader's interest and lure him to read on. For instance, in the example below, a sleigh might evoke associations with Santa Claus, a bygone area, travel, etc.

Example:

An antique sleigh stood in the yard, snow after snow banked up against its eroded runners.

– *A COUNTRY LOVE STORY* by Jean Stafford

Character Portrait:

Done well, this opening can have an emotional hook, even if you aren't in the head of the character that is being described.

Example:

The girl's scalp looked as though it had been singed by fire - strands of thatchy red hair snaked away from her face, then settled against her skin, pasted there by sweat and sunscreen and the blown grit and dust of travel.

– *HER REAL NAME* by Charles D'Ambrosio

Question:

The risk here is that you may pose a question that the reader answers with a bored, “No,” and thus closes the book. You’ll have to be creative. I don’t necessarily find the example below stimulating, but...well, it’s an example from a published novel.

Example:

“Well, Peter, any sign of them yet?” This was the question addressed on the 20th of May, 1859, to his servant - a young, lusty fellow with whitish down on his chin and with small dim eyes - by a gentleman of just forty years of age...

– *FATHERS AND SONS* by Ivan Turgenev

Travel:

As a background, it can set the mood.

Example:

The snowflakes had a hypnotic effect on me. I was getting more and more drowsy, but I needed to keep my eyes open. What if I missed my station and got off at the wrong one, rushed out into the white arctic tundra, totally dazed, only to be met by wolves who were ready to tear me to pieces! Now, that would be unforgivable and unworthy of a true Trapper.

– *MY LIFE AS A DOG* by Reidar Joensson

Character’s Thoughts:

Advantage: Throwing your reader immediately into the character’s head can help you flag his obstacle/conflict for the reader.

Disadvantage: You delay establishing time and place. This must somehow be woven into the character’s viewpoint in the next couple of paragraphs.

Example:

If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me, thought Moses Herzog.

– *HERZOG* by Saul Bellow

Prediction:

Advantage: Readers might read it with a sense of foreboding

Disadvantage: It decreases suspense, because it reveals the ending (in general terms)

Example:

Neither of the Grimes sisters would have a happy life, and looking back it always seemed that the trouble began with their parents' divorce.

– *THE EASTER PARADE* by Richard Yates

FINAL THOUGHTS ON YOUR OPENING

- First and foremost, your opening must convey the essence of your story. For instance, if you've written a pulse-pounding opening about a young woman who's about to jump off a cliff, and then, in the next couple of pages, reveal that she's really not suicidal - in fact, that your book is really a heartwarming story of Victorian courtship in rural America - your readers will feel cheated. Readers who feel cheated will typically stop reading.
- Craft the opening well. Spend time on it - your reader's first impression of you will be that opening page. Concentrate on what you do well as a writer, and do it even better in your opening.
- Begin your novel in the right place: choose a defining moment in the protagonist's life. Your opening should speak to something that is of vital importance to your protagonist. Otherwise, you've lost your first and perhaps only opportunity to get your reader emotionally involved, and thus make him root for, your main character.
- Intensity is important. Your first chapter should be liberally sprinkled with tension. Your readers must be cued that emotionally-charged events are about to take place; that the characters' lives will be changed, and their future happiness is at stake. In other words, paint a picture that raises reader curiosity and makes him want to turn pages.
- Your reader doesn't want to read about a character that's been written hundreds of times before. Even if your story tackles the proverbial shepherd vs. cattleman theme, or the forensic doctor vs. the serial killer, make your characters interesting enough to appear unique. In other words, turn your characters into "real people" with all the quirks and idiosyncracies that real people have.

FINAL THOUGHTS (CONT.)

- Be sure you anchor your scenes in time and place! I cannot tell you how many new writers begin a book with next to no indication of the locale, time period, season, or time of day. Think how discombobulated you would be if the following paragraph opened a book you'd just bought for a leisurely read:

“Tom McMasters knew he didn’t have far to go now. He smiled smugly, listening to the creak, creak, creaking as he sped along. All his worries would be over when he reached his destination. He shifted dextrously and scratched his nose.”

So where do you think the above story takes place? America? England? Canada? (The character’s surname isn’t necessarily an indication.) Is this an historical or a contemporary book? Is Tom “driving” or is he a passenger? Is his vehicle a horse, buggy, car, truck, stage coach, chariot? Is it day, night, hot, cold? Is he “creaking” along a desert, beach, prairie, etc? You get the idea.

CHAPTER ONE TO “THE END”

Before you sit down to write your narrative hook, you have some legwork to do. Research is a necessary evil, even for contemporary writers, who at least must have a working knowledge of their characters’ professions, housing, and the flora and fauna of their setting.

Here’s a checklist for things that you should have accomplished before you write Scene One:

- Research the “conventions” (sometimes called the “formula”) of your genre. Find out if the publisher you’re targeting offers “author guidelines” and get your hands on them. (Sometimes these guidelines are published on the publishers’ websites. Other times, you have to send a publisher an SASE - self-addressed, stamped envelope - and ask for a copy.)
- Read no fewer than 30 books by different authors in your genre. Concentrate your genre research on new authors. I define a new author as anyone who has had three or fewer books published over the last three years. Editors rarely let new writers get away with the kinds of things that veteran bestsellers pull off (mainly because the bestsellers have a huge following, and editors don’t want to mess with a good thing.) For instance, Danielle Steele or Nora Roberts could probably get away with writing a book in which the heroine makes love to more than one man, but when I was proposing my sixth novel with a similar theme, my editor threw a conniption fit, even though I clearly pointed out that this scene would happen after the heroine and her lover both think the hero is dead. I was verbally hand-slapped and sent back to the drawing board. So...being published doesn’t guarantee that you can write whatever you want. (By the way: if you find yourself grumbling about the limitations of your genre, it might be time to take a leap of faith and write “mainstream” fiction instead. Just keep in mind that it’s easier to get your foot in the publishing door through genre fiction.)
- Research your setting (era, locale, seasons, flora & fauna, etc.),

colloquialisms and slang, transportation, clothing, morals and values, the political climate of the time, technology, the protagonists' profession, secondary characters' professions, etc. Be sure you have enough information to write a reliable "environment" for your protagonist.

- Know everything there is to know about your character, including his socio-economic background, religious affiliation, ethnicity, habits, obsessions, goals, motivations, conflicts, physical characteristics, pets, children, career, family of origin, etc. Determine in general terms where your book is going; in other words, you should develop, at least in your mind, a sketchy plot outline.

And now, you are ready to write.

CHAPTERS 1 TO 3 ("THE PROPOSAL")

I cannot stress enough how important your first chapters are. Your concept and writing style, as well as your book's general sales potential, will be judged by your book proposal, which consists of your first three chapters (and prologue, if you have one) plus your synopsis.

Obviously, if an editor doesn't like Chapter One, she isn't going to read to the "really great scene" you wrote in Chapter Six. And if you can't sell an editor on your story by the time she finishes Chapter Three, you won't sell your book. Period. The first three chapters and a synopsis are all an editor wants for the initial read. So take extra care to make these chapters compelling.

As you sit down to write page one, you may not be thinking much about your ending, but a good first chapter holds the threads that you'll weave into a satisfying ending. In the first chapter, you introduce the reader to the protagonist and his goals. Conflicts begin.

During this chapter, you allow the protagonist some "growing room" so he can become heroic by the ending. (For instance, your journalist sleuth might be portrayed in your opening pages as terrified of heights, but in the climactic scene, he has to rappel part way down a cliff to save an injured child.) Remember: conflict changes people. Your conflict doesn't have to be life-threatening (such as in the above example); it can be value-driven instead. (Most real-life conflicts are.) In any event, set up your core problem in Chapter One.

In Chapters 1-3 the following milestones should take place in your story:

- Introduce the protagonist. Define his goal, motivation, conflict, and obstacle for the reader.
- Discuss and/or foreshadow the antagonist.
- Hint/reveal the first subplot. Tie it in with a major “secondary” character.
- Create tension, captivate your reader.
- End Chapter Three with a “cliffhanger” to make an editor want to read Chapter Four (and thus ask you to send her your full manuscript for consideration!)

THE MIDDLE

Chapter Four starts the middle of your book. Obviously, the length of your book will determine how many chapters the “middle” has. Every writer has different ways to determine chapter length. A good rule of thumb is to have at least one “scene, sequel, scene” sequence or one “sequel, scene, sequel” sequence (see the section on Plotting for more information.) Personally, my chapters vary from 15 to 35 pages. “High Action” is the only hard and fast rule I use for determining a chapter ending. In other words, I want my reader to be so fascinated by what’s happening at the end of my chapter, she can’t help but turn the page.

Theoretically, the “low points” in your action should happen in the middle of your chapter, because a reader is less likely to set a book down in mid-chapter. Your job as an author is to do everything in your power to make that reader resent having to put the book down - until she reaches the end, of course. Think of it this way: a reader who puts down your book for any reason - even eye fatigue - is less likely to finish it.

Conflict will escalate in this portion of your story until your protagonist is forced into action. This action should change the direction of the story or involve a major plot complication, one that looks like it might keep the protagonist from achieving his story goal.

In the middle chapters, the following milestones should take

place:

- The main character’s goals may change scene by scene as conflict intensifies; however, keep your protagonist focused on his “story goal” (ie, finding true love, solving the mystery, beating the aliens, etc.)
- Introduce the remaining “secondary” characters and the subplots that are linked to them.
- Continue raising the emotional conflict, whittling away the protagonist’s options until he is reduced to only two choices.
- Deepen the characterization of your protagonist (and major secondary characters, especially the antagonist); strengthen character motivations; throw major complications/obstacles in the path of your protagonist.
- Keep escalating the emotional intensity of your story.

THE LAST 2 TO 3 CHAPTERS

In these crucial chapters, you are resolving your subplots. Be sure you tie-up the least important subplot first; proceed to wrap up subplots in ascending order of importance. The final chapters should also include three vital components to every work of fiction: the black moment, the climax, and the resolution.

The Black Moment

Your protagonist faces his final, and biggest, crisis of the novel. This crisis is often called the “Black Moment,” the “Dark Moment,” or the “Defining Moment” because the odds appear to be thoroughly stacked against your protagonist and a happy ending appears to be impossible. At this point, your character should be faced with only two options. If he acts altruistically, he achieves his story goal and the ending is happy. If he acts selfishly, he is punished by not achieving his story goal, and the ending is not happy. Note: In genre fiction, the protagonist always acts altruistically and achieves his story goal. Only in mainstream fiction and literary fiction do you have the option of punishing your character because he made the wrong choice. (Example: *Gone with the Wind* is not considered a romance by today’s “industry standards”. Instead, it’s considered an historical novel

with strong romantic elements. Why? Because Scarlett chooses selfishly one too many times, and her behavior costs her Rhett. To be marketed as a genre romance, the hero and heroine must be in a happy monogamous relationship -- if not married -- by the end.)

The Climax

Your climax happens when your protagonist exhibits extraordinary courage (or some other form of character growth) and acts heroically. To craft a satisfying climax, examine your plot for a “surprise” and build toward it; look for surprises; exploit character emotion; make use of poetic justice; show the protagonist growing to the point where he finally has the courage to take “heroic” action. (Example: In the movie, *Casablanca*, Rick is merely the protagonist, who’s in love with Ilse. When he sacrifices his love, giving her up for the good of the war effort, he becomes heroic.)

The Resolution

These last short pages (I try not to exceed ten) show the effect of the climax on the characters. While doing this (ie, wrapping up loose ends and showing how the characters plan to move on with their lives now that the core problem has been solved,) I recommend saving one teeny, weenie conflict for your resolution.

This final conflict has to be significant enough to make the reader smile and think, “Oh good. I was hoping that would happen.” The conflict might stem from one of your subplots; then again, it might be fairly integral to the core of your genre. For instance, when I’m writing a romance, one of my favorite devices is to wait until the final five pages before I let my hero declare to my heroine, “I love you.” (Note: he may have thought, “I love you,” a half dozen times in the story, but in a romance - as you might imagine! – thinking he loves her isn’t good enough. He has to speak the words.) In any event, while writing your resolution, remember to keep it short. Editors seek out books where the climax and resolution come close together. They seem to think this technique makes for a stronger, more memorable ending.

Now that your protagonist has achieved his story goal, your book is finished. Any other scene (ie, 40 pages of how the protagonist puts out the prairie fire) is anti-climatic. If you want your characters to put out prairie fires, have them do so somewhere in the middle of the book. Better yet, use the fire as your “dark moment” and show your character facing his worst

fears and rising above them.

GOOD CHAPTER ENDINGS

I talked earlier about my trick of ending a chapter in the midst of “high action.” This writing device is called a “cliffhanger.” Cliffhangers don’t have to be literal (you don’t have to leave your protagonist dangling from a cliff) but they do have to be compelling enough for the reader to think, “Oh no! What happens next?”

A good chapter ending will accomplish one of several things: it will surprise your reader, make him smile, make him wonder, or make him sigh. To do this:

Inflate or deflate a character’s spirits

Example from *Daughter of the Blood* by Anne Bishop:

“I’m not ‘naughty.’ Little boys are naughty.” He pushed her away from him stepping over her where she lay sprawled (and whimpering) on the flagstones. “If you ever touch me like that again, I’ll rip your hand off.”

He walked through the corridors to his room, aware that the servants skittered away from him, that an aftertaste of violence hung in the air around him.

He didn’t care. He went to his room, stripped off his clothes, laid down on his bed, and stared at the ceiling, terrified to close his eyes because every time he did he saw a shattered crystal chalice (and heard the oracle’s) three words:

She has come.

Give a flash of action, insight, or revelation

Example from *Always Her Hero* by Adrienne deWolfe

“I love you,” she whispered huskily.

He swallowed. How could that be? How could that possibly be?

He tried to force a response past the lump jamming his throat. But as the seconds ticked by, her smile never wavered. Her eyes never dimmed. She snuggled closer, resting her head on his shoulder, placing a soft, freckled hand over the unsteady pounding in his chest. Dimly he realized, with a humbling sense of awe, that she hadn’t been seeking a response from him. She hadn’t been seeking anything more than his willingness to hear a

heartfelt truth.

As she drifted into a peaceful sleep, he buried his face in her hair. And for the first time since Gabriel's death, he let tears roll down his cheeks.

Ask a question

Example from *King & Raven* by Cary James

We had crested the last ridge before (Queen Guinevere) drew up and turned to me, her face sorrowful. "And yet I know women were unhappy then, as well. Women wed to men they could not love. Women caught by love without hope. Women bound to nunneries for unanswered love.

"Madam, pray God you may forget this vision."

She lay a hand on my arm and at her touch my heart nearly stopped its beating. "Oh, good Sir Michel, may I not pursue it? As all my knights do chase their own phantasms?"

End in the middle of the scene

A caution about ending in the middle of the scene: this device gets old quickly. Keep in mind that most books are printed with facing pages. The "suspense" you're trying to build lasts about a second. Thus, middle-of-the-scene endings need a lot of punch in order to work. In the following example from one of my own books, I believe this middle-of-the-scene ending works for two reasons: I break the scene in "high action" and I switch character viewpoints:

Example from *Scoundrel for Hire* by Adrienne deWolfe *Chapter 2, Ending:*

This was it. Her last chance to change her mind. Once she told Jones her plan, she'd be stuck with him. There'd be no turning back.

Courage, Silver. This is for Papa.

"I suppose all that remains, Mr. Jones, is to tell you what I would be hiring you for."

She waited for her resolve to resurrect itself. Since moving to Colorado, she'd often had to be strong, even harsh, to protect her happy-go-lucky papa and see his business stayed afloat. Now, once again, Papa needed to be saved from himself. His time was running out. No matter what she might personally think of Jones, the man was quite clearly a Godsend in her time of need.

Jones raised an inquisitive eyebrow. She drew a bolstering breath.
"Mr. Jones," she said crisply, "I would like you to pose as a British aristocrat in order to seduce my father's fiancé."

Scoundrel for Hire
Chapter 3, Beginning:

Rafe's jaw dropped. Then he laughed out loud. The way Silver had been trying to reel him in, he'd figured she must be plotting a fraud. Still, he hadn't given her enough credit. He'd never dreamed she was capable of this much guile.

"You want me to do what?" he gasped, clutching the tree limb to keep from tipping over the balcony's railing.

THE NUTS & BOLTS OF PLOTTING

"Plot is the plan - the nervous system - of your story."

- Josip Novakovich

A story is a record of how someone deals with challenge on the way to an important goal. Your reader's suspension of disbelief is based on the parameters you set up in your story. Thus, everything your characters do must follow logically within those parameters. The trick is determining whether you have a full-fledged story or merely an incident.

An incident makes for a great scene (or even a couple of scenes.) However, it can't supply all your plotting needs. For example, say you envision (as I did) that you want to write a book about a charming con man who is hired by an heiress to save her millionaire daddy from the matrimonial clutches of a gold digger. Great. That's the broad version of the storyline. In other words, if you're writing a romance - as I was - you would then have to come up with various incidents that keep the coconspirators' romance on the rocks while they work to discredit the gold digger.

If you're writing a mystery, you'd have to devise a plausible murder and conduct the investigation within the parameters of the broader storyline, perhaps making both the con man and the heiress prime murder suspects. To do this, you would string together a series of incidents, each one building on the one before, so that you consistently escalate the emotional tension in your book.

"If a writer is true to his characters, they will give him his plot."

- Phyllis Bottome

Some ways to tell that you don't have enough "plot" to carry your storyline:

- Your characters could completely resolve their differences if they sat down and had a heart-to-heart talk.
- To move your story forward, you start relying on "coincidence" (ie, in Chapter 7, without establishing a logical precedent, you give your heroine a long-lost relative who claims the hero is really the heroine's cousin, thus presenting a new obstacle to the romance.)
- Emotional tension between the protagonist and antagonist relies on the same old argument. (Rule of thumb: Introduce a new conflict - or a significant twist to the original version - every couple of chapters.)
- You rely heavily on narrative description, scenes with secondary characters, and banal dialogue to fill page space (ie, you start padding your prose.)
- You come to a jarring halt in, say, Chapter 6, because you've resolved your initial source of conflict and thus, you find yourself scrambling for another idea to keep the protagonist from reaching his goal.
- Emotional tension in the story dwindles to the point where even you don't care about the protagonist. In fact, you find yourself writing scenes that focus on the secondary characters, because they're more interesting. (This is a BIG problem, and means your story probably lacks character depth as well as plot depth.)

"Never begin a story at the beginning. A good story starts in the middle, retrieves the past, and carries on to the end. Your story begins when reader emotion connects with the protagonist's emotion."

- Rita Gallagher

If you think about the stories you love to read, you'll probably find they all have one thing in common: your protagonist's passion for some goal, person, or thing is the driving force behind the action. Your plot maps a course that shows how your protagonist struggles on the way to fulfilling his passion.

You don't need much to make up a plot. Work from a conflict. If your protagonist is a fireman, make your antagonist an arsonist - or a Siberian tiger that's stuck in a 1,000 year old Redwood tree.

How your story is organized depends primarily on its sequence of events. However, to start a story as a conflict begins, and end the story when the conflict is resolved, makes for dismally dull reading. Thus, savvy (and might I add popular) writers start in the middle of a conflict, sprinkle in vital background information, then continue the sequence of events until the conflict is resolved.

Another method: You can start at the end of a conflict and make the entire story a backflash. For instance, in murder mysteries, the opening chapters often start with a dead body. Someone has to investigate the case, piecing together the "story" resulted in the corpse.

There are several ways to start plotting a novel. One involves drawing ideas from your characters' backgrounds and value systems. Another technique is to cull ideas from your setting. You might also find fodder for your plot in the traditional themes of literary fiction. Yet another way to begin is to know and understand the "Seven Requirements of Happiness." Finally, there is the "Scene and Sequel" technique. The majority of this section will be devoted to "Scene and Sequel" because I have found it to be fail-safe.

DRAWING FROM CHARACTER & SETTING

In practicing any of the plotting techniques discussed in this manual, you will find that character and setting are your primary generators for story twists. If you're starting from ground zero, then ask yourself what your characters treasure most. By putting that thing at stake, you immediately have conflict. This technique can be broken yet further into the kind of struggle you set up for your protagonist.

For instance, your protagonist and antagonist might be fighting for the same material thing (a job promotion, a piece of land, a lover, etc.). Or, your protagonist and antagonist may be at odds over a principle or idea. (The hero wants revenge; the heroine wants love. The hero wants freedom and likes to roam; the heroine wants security and is longing for a stable home environment.)

When combing your setting for story ideas, ask yourself what is so unique about the time period, culture, people, social and moral climate, the flora and fauna, etc. that may actually hinder - or help - your protagonist in achieving his goal? For instance, in *Gone With the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell pits Scarlett's resourcefulness

against the horrors of war: food and medical shortages, army deserters and war criminals, and perhaps most memorable of all: the burning of Atlanta.

The Literary Tradition

In the literary tradition, there are five primary themes from which all plots evolve:

Man against Man	(The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes)
Man against Self	(Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde)
Man against Nature	(Old Man and the Sea)
Man against Society	(The Scarlet Letter)
Man against Machine	(2001: A Space Odyssey)
Man against God	(Prometheus)
God against Everybody	(Ancient Myths)

Keep in mind that any plot that is derived from opposing character values is going to be laced with “Man against Man” and “Man against Self” themes. Because the primary generator of plot is character, you’ll see these two themes more often than any other in popular novels.

Let’s look at some examples from genre fiction.

Romance

If you are writing a Romance, your primary story is about relationships. Thus, your romantic story conflicts will arise from “Man against Man” and “Man against Himself.” (This latter theme is typically called “Internal Conflict” among writers of popular fiction. Example: the hero hates his job and wants to quit, but he desperately needs the money to finance his son’s chemotherapy treatments.) Subplots in a romance may arise from any or all of the other literary traditions. For example, in my third novel, *Texas Wildcat*, my hero and heroine battled rustlers (“Man against Man”), a cougar and a drought (“Man against Nature”), and the prejudices of the Woolgrowers’ and Cattlemen’s associations in order to graze sheep and cattle on the same range (“Man against Society”).

Action/Adventure, Thrillers, and Westerns

Adventure, Thriller, and Western writers tend to use the “Man against Nature” and “Man against Society” quite a bit. In *Shane*, for instance, wealthy ranching interests oppose the sodbusters, who must take a stand

against the cattlemen's hired gun. The sodbusters have lots of "gumption" and are willing to fight, but they have no real champion who can effectively defend their homesteads and families. Enter Shane, a man who wants to end his gunfighting days for good ("Man against Self"), and yet, by the end of the novel, he is forced into a showdown with the cattlemen's hired gun. ("Man against Man").

Mystery

In Mysteries, the primary suspense comes from the protagonist's struggle to unmask the killer. This type of conflict can come from several themes: Man against Man (where the detective knows he is pitted against a serial killer); Man against Society (where the detective may be battling the court for the right to reopen a closed investigation); or Man against Self (where all the clues lead the detective to believe that he committed the murder because he "blacked out" and has no alibi for his whereabouts the night of the crime.)

Science Fiction and Fantasy

In Science Fiction and Fantasy, "Man against Man," "Man against Nature," and "Man against Machine" tend to be popular. But you'll also see the "Man against God" theme quite a bit. In *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, for instance, an eccentric genius conducts experiments that will turn various animals into human beings. Another popular Science Fiction/Fantasy theme is "God against Everybody." (Example: Superman's home planet of Krypton is doomed, forcing his parents to send him into outer space in the hopes that he'll survive.)

THE SEVEN ELEMENTS OF HAPPINESS

In this method, you are turning once again to your character for plot. The technique draws from psychology. Mental health experts generally recognize that seven elements are needed for a person's peace of mind. If your protagonist lacks one or more of the following (or "thinks" he lacks one or more of the following), he has no chance for happiness:

1. Health
2. Love
3. Hope
4. Job Suitability and Opportunity
5. Economic Comfort
6. Flexibility and Adaptability to Change
7. Reasonable chance to achieve realistic goals.

Take away any of the above "elements" from your protagonist, and you have a man or woman in search of something. Thus, you have "story."

For example, in my fourth novel, *Always Her Hero*, Michael, the protagonist, believes he is dying from some mysterious illness (element #1), and he has no hope for a cure (elements #3 and #7). Furthermore, he is worried that when he dies, he will leave his ward and his wife with little savings and lots of debt (element #5). Meanwhile, the heroine is in search of love (element #2). When she and Michael are discovered under compromising circumstances, they are forced to marry. She learns that same day that her new husband may die before the year's end (element #6). Furthermore, even though the heroine is an herbalist and a healer, she doesn't believe she possesses the requisite knowledge to cure Michael and thus live happily ever after with him (element #7).

As you can see, the more elements you strip away from your characters, the more opportunities you have for building story conflict. And conflict is the ingredient that gives your book spice, making your novel interesting enough to keep readers turning the pages.

SCENE AND SEQUEL TECHNIQUE

“Books are written in scenes and sequels, not chapters.”

– Rita Gallagher

What does the above quote mean? Well, to make writing books easier, novelists have developed a formula to create compelling, page-turning chapters by breaking them into their two primary components: the scene and the sequel.

The Scene

A scene can be defined as the action in your story. Your characters live through a scene, experiencing situations that either help or hinder them in their journey to their goal. Scenes are immediate, rooted in the present moment. In other words, they’re not the narrative passages where your protagonist is thinking about the past or the future. However, good scenes will intersperse a smattering of “internal dialogue” with the action to help the reader understand why the character is behaving the way he’s behaving. (The operative word here is “smattering”. Too much internal dialogue bogs down the immediacy of your action and takes the reader into the slower “sequel” mode.) A good example of a scene is a passage of dialogue.

The Sequel

A sequel can be defined as reaction. Your characters’ thoughts are the primary element of your sequels, although author narration can also serve as a “sequel.” During sequel passages, your characters summarize the facts that they just lived through (ie, the previous scene,) in order to help the reader understand why the character is coming to a major decision. This major decision precipitates the action in the next scene.

Sequels can be as short as a sentence or as long as many pages. In category fiction, I recommend that you limit your sequels to no more than five pages. As noted earlier, sequels, while necessary, are slower-paced than scenes. If readers are going to lose interest in your story, they’re probably going to do it during your sequels.

Typically, your first chapter will start in sequel. Why? Readers like a brief

(I repeat, BRIEF) introduction to the person who is telling the story. This means you need to sketch out just enough information about who the protagonist is, what he is thinking, what his goal is, what his obstacles are, and what's at stake if he fails to achieve his goal, before you drop the first bomb on him by going into your action sequence (ie, "scene).

As in real life, your plot must happen in a logical order, or your book won't be believable. And as is true in real life, each time your character makes a decision, his next set of choices grows more narrow.

Let's examine the Scene and Sequel technique more closely.

THE FUNCTION OF A SCENE

Any good scene will serve three main functions. Plus, it will be written in a specific order so that readers do not become confused. (Note: See the example I excerpted from my fourth novel, *Scoundrel for Hire*, in the Appendix)

The Three Functions of a Scene:

1. A scene stimulates change in the character (ie, forces the character to experience something that contributes to his growth). Thus, in scene, a character must live through events and circumstances.
2. A scene creates rising tension, thus moving the story forward.
3. A scene's conflict is always EXTERNAL conflict.

The scene must be written in the following order:

1. The character's goal is established. In fiction, character goals can be divided into three basic categories:
 - Possession (of love, a job, gems, facts, territory, etc.)
 - Resistance (against oppression, fear, financial loss, change, etc.)
 - Revenge (for a slight, a loss, a betrayal, etc.)

Remember: no matter what goal, or combination of goals, you choose for

your scene, they must be specific, concrete, and immediate enough to move your story forward.

2. Once you establish the protagonist's scene goal for your reader, you then reveal or heighten your story conflict. (Conflict is the obstacle preventing your protagonist from reaching his goal.). Remember: create conflict that will steadily build the emotional (and if you're writing a romance, the sexual) tension in your story. If you're writing mystery or action/adventure, create conflict that heightens the suspense.

3. Finally, your scene will end with a disaster, one that thwarts the protagonist yet again from reaching his goal.

Note: "disaster" in this context doesn't mean that the earth opens up to swallow your protagonist; I use the term loosely here. While it is perfectly permissible to end your scene with a cliffhanger, you'll probably want to vary your pacing and alternate with scenes that climax more subtly. In other words, you might pose an intriguing question, one that challenges the character's values, view point, or intended action. This question is designed to keep the reader reading.

Remember: the emotional tension of each scene should mount over the last one. To do this, increase the stakes for your protagonist and whittle away his choices, scene by scene.

THE FUNCTION OF A SEQUEL

Sequels, like scenes, serve three specific functions. They also must be written in a specific order to make sense to the reader. (Note: See the example I excerpted from my fourth novel, *Scoundrel for Hire*, in the Appendix)

The Three Functions of a Sequel:

1. A sequel translates the preceding scene's disaster into a new scene goal for your protagonist. (In other words, the protagonist broods for a few lines over the trauma he just lived through. Then he considers ways to get himself out of his scrape.)

2. A sequel telescopes reality and controls the tempo and pace of your story. In other words, in sequel, you condense and reiterate the events of the last scene. (Writers who run out of story on page twenty tend not to have grasped the "sequel" concept.)

3. A sequel's conflict is always INTERNAL conflict.

The Order of a Sequel:

1. The protagonist reacts to the disaster he just experienced (ie, the question you raised in the previous scene).

2. The protagonist faces a dilemma: he must review his options/choices for getting back on the road to his story goal

3. Finally, the protagonist makes a decision, which leads to whatever goal you establish for him in the next scene. (In other words, the next time we see the protagonist, he should be acting on the decision he just made in your sequel.)

Throughout your novel, you lay your scenes and sequels like bricks, one on top of the other, to establish continuity. Your goal is to carry your reader along so he isn't thinking about it.

THE CLIMAX OF YOUR STORY

Usually in one of the last two chapters of your book, you write your story climax. If you've been following the scene and sequel technique, making your protagonist face disasters and steadily narrowing the choices he can make to save his hide, then your climax will evolve naturally. It will come at the point in your story where your character only has two choices. If he acts selfishly, he will be punished. If he acts unselfishly, he will be rewarded (ie, your story's resolution.)

Example: Say you're writing a romance, and the goal of your protagonist, Lord Ravenskeep, is revenge. He wants to destroy the wealthy merchant, Mr. Findley, who twenty years earlier cheated the elder Ravenskeep at cards, thus costing the Ravenskeep family their estate. The younger Ravenskeep decides that until he can find a way to ruin Findley's import business, the next best way to get even with Findley is to seduce Findley's daughter, thereby breaking her - and the old man's - heart.

Well, throughout the course of your novel, you have to thwart Ravenskeep in his goal of revenge. You might use several "disasters" to accomplish this author goal. For instance, once he meets our blushing young ingenue, he realizes he is actually attracted to her. What's more, as he starts to interact more regularly with Findley, he grows a soft spot for the old man. By the time Ravenskeep starts to concede - privately, mind you - that Findley isn't the card-sharping menace the elder Ravenskeep always painted and that the elder Ravenskeep in fact had a serious drinking, gambling, and lying problem, the younger Ravenskeep may realize he's hopelessly in love with Findley's daughter. At this point, the story climaxes, and Ravenskeep has only two choices:

A) He can remain true to his story goal - revenge - by marrying Findley's daughter and destroying Findley's business. If Ravenskeep does this, of course, he will lose the love of Findley's daughter, because what woman could love a man who deliberately harms her father? (In other words, Ravenskeep is "punished" with the loss of true love.)

B) He can come to terms with the fact that his father had a serious drinking, gambling, and lying problem, and therefore, abandon his original story goal. As a result, he will grow from his experiences and learn to forgive both Findley and the elder Ravenskeep for putting him through a rotten childhood. If Ravenskeep takes this route, he wins the girl and eventually reinherits the estate through marriage. (In other words, he's doubly rewarded.)

Literary fiction differs from category fiction in that literary characters may choose unselfishly and STILL wind up feeling miserable/punished. This is the "life is hard/unfair/hopeless" premise. Category fiction (ie, "popular fiction") tends to reward good and punish evil.

THE RESOLUTION OF YOUR STORY

In your resolution (which, by the way, should happen no earlier than your last chapter), you prove your premise (ie, "Love conquers all" "Man has nothing to fear but fear itself," etc.). This is where your story ends (as I discussed in the "Chapter One to the End" section.). Don't spend another 20 pages tying up loose ends. The savvy writer has all major plot threads tied up by the resolution, leaving only a few minor issues unresolved.

Give the reader a satisfying ending. Try to include a memorable last line. As Mickey Spillane once said (I'm paraphrasing): "Your first line sells your book. Your last line sells your next book."

Example of a Novel's Resolution

This excerpt was taken from *Texas Lover*, the second book in my Texas Trilogy: [Note: Rorie, the heroine, is sitting in front of Wes on his horse.]

Wes wrapped his arm around her waist, and a delicious shiver gusted down her spine. "Besides," he drawled, "I have a surprise waiting for my sweetheart out by the blackberry bush."

Rorie knew she reddened at the earthy promise in his voice, but she was too elated to care. He loved her, he wanted her, and he'd given her everything she'd ever dreamed of. Since he'd come into her life with his devilish laugh, his roguish flirtations, and his fallen-angel's smile, her days had been a series of miracles, one right after the other. She was a woman who counted her blessings. She would cherish him until the end of her days, and if he chose to continue his life as a Texas Ranger, she would find some way to accept his decision. After all, she understood the importance of having dreams and making them come true.

As if reading her thoughts, he slipped a hand behind her, fishing in the pocket of his vest.

"Hey, Topher!"

"Yeah, Pa?"

"I've got something for you."

A flash of metal tumbled in the fading light. Topher caught the object in his hand. His eyes grew as round as silver dollars when he gazed down at his palm.

"It's your Ranger badge!"

"That's right, son. I won't be needing it any more."

Rorie's heart tripped. Tilting back her head, she gazed up at him through a shimmering rainbow of tears. "But Wes, Rangering means so

much to you. Are you sure you want to give it up?"

He chuckled, spurring Two-Step out of the yard and into the dancing orange and yellow flowers of the meadow.

"Darlin', I'm through chasing bad men." His hand strayed down her ribs in the naughtiest, pulse-stirring way. "Now I just want to be one."

WAYS TO LOSE YOUR READER

As you might imagine, the plotting techniques mentioned in this handbook are great because they help you shape the action of your story. However, they should be well-blended so they don't appear obvious or worse, formulaic, to your reader.

You must take the “nuts and bolts” of fiction writing and craft a seamless story. Each time you jerk your reader out of the storyline with “author commentary” (often called author intrusion), inconsistent characterization, glaring misinformation in your research, or unbelievable/inconceivable circumstances in your plot, you run the risk of having that reader put down your book.

Let's look at some other guaranteed ways to lose your reader:

Slow Character Exposition

Make sure your writing has immediate character exposition. When a reader opens a book or turns to a new chapter, she wants to know: Who am I? What am I doing? What's at stake for me? Who's in my way? If you spend three pages writing about the color of the sunset, your reader is likely to fall asleep – unless she is plunged into the emotions experienced by some character who is observing the sunset. Make it clear that this character is the protagonist. Or the antagonist. Or your protagonist's main sidekick. Don't leave your reader guessing “who she is” when she starts reading a scene.

Weak Conflict and Slow Pacing

(Note: see the chapter on pacing) Slowly paced scenes, and especially slowly paced chapters, will make your reader skim (maybe even skip), your precious prose. Cut out all extraneous information. Balance action with introspection and exposition (ie, narration). Also make sure incidents in your book operate on two levels: the external conflict should trigger an incident in the characters' internal, value-driven conflict, and vice versa. (In a romance, however, always emphasize the effects of the romantic conflict over the effects of the external.) Finally, be sure you arrange your scenes in order of escalating tension, saving the most intense scene for the climax. This climatic scene should settle the future of the romance, solve the mystery, etc. If, instead, your most intense scene comes in Chapter 6, by Chapter 8, your reader will start thinking, “Uh...where's this book going? And why should I care?”

Sloppy Viewpoint and Transition Shifts

While these are perhaps the easiest “no-no’s” to fix, they are also the most damaging to your reader’s sense of comfort. I cringe every time I see a sloppy transition or confusing viewpoint shift in a published novel. (Where the heck was that author’s editor?) If a reader is consistently jerked out of the story by poor writing (ie, she has to reread passages to figure out what you’re trying to convey,) she’ll eventually stop reading the book. Some readers will refuse to buy your next one. Remember: readers of popular fiction want to be entertained. Don’t make them struggle through your prose.

Here’s an example of sloppy viewpoint and transition shifts:

Lucky hurried to the porch. Noticing the geraniums in the flowerbed, he smiled in relief, picked a half dozen, and wrapped a paper napkin around the ends, hoping the grease stains looked like water. Maybe Jeanie wouldn’t notice.

As usual, he was late. Also as usual, he’d missed a button while fastening his shirt. Jeanie crossed her arms, tapping her toe as she loomed over him on the threshold. With her red hair and fiery cheeks to mimic the blaze in her eyes, she looked like some ancient Celtic warrior. She could kill him. Just kill him. She curled her lip.

Oh good, she’s not mad.

“I smell barbecue.

She brushed a drooping red curl off her perspiring forehead. She’d been wilting in the heat of a Carolina midsummer’s eve for nigh on thirty minutes. She didn’t know why she’d let her sister talk her into yet another date with Lucky Mason.

“You reek of pork!”

He knew how much Jeanie liked pork. They’d had their first date at Ma’s Barbecue and Truck Stop. That’s why he liked Jeanie. And that’s why he knew from the beginning that she’d understand why he’d just had to stop by Ma’s Barbecue tonight...even if it had made him a wee bit late. He didn’t have a pocket watch, but he could hear the strains of the fiddle from the hoedown. The river breeze carried music and laughter past her, too, and the stench of pork grease, of course.

“I picked these for you.” He smiled sheepishly, thrusting the geraniums at her, and she wanted to scream. Great clumps of uprooted earth littered her once immaculate flowerbed. Was there ever a bigger moron than Lucky Mason?

In the above passage, the narrative description of Jeanie in paragraph two throws us back into Lucky's viewpoint, even though we seem to have started paragraph two in Jeanie's viewpoint – admittedly, however, even that isn't clear. While we definitely end paragraph two in Jeanie's viewpoint, we throw the reader into Lucky's viewpoint for one sentence, and then we pick up Jeanie again, or at least, we seem to.

Another problem with the Lucky/Jeanie passage: untagged dialogue. At first glance, the reader doesn't know who's accusing whom of smelling like pork, and frankly, the following line doesn't offer clarification. What a nightmare!

Here's the same passage with clear viewpoint shifts and transitions:
(I **bolded** the viewpoint shifts)

Lucky hurried to the porch. Noticing the geraniums in the flowerbed, he smiled in relief, picked a half dozen, and wrapped a paper napkin around the ends, hoping the grease stains looked like water. Maybe Jeanie wouldn't notice.

As the sound of the bell reverberated through the hall, Jeanie lunged for the door. She wished she had a shotgun as she threw it wide. Spinster or not, she didn't know why she'd let her sister talk her into yet another date with Lucky Mason. Crossing her arms, Jeanie tapped her toe and did her best to make her 5-foot frame loom over him on the threshold. As usual, Lucky was late. Also as usual, he'd missed a button while fastening his shirt.

"I smell barbecue," she greeted suspiciously, brushing a drooping curl off her forehead. "Lucky Mason, you reek of pork!"

Oh good, she isn't mad. Lucky smiled sheepishly. He knew how much Jeanie liked pork. They'd had their first date at Ma's Barbecue and Truck Stop. That's why he liked Jeanie. And that's why he knew from the beginning that she'd understand why he'd just had to stop by Ma's Barbecue tonight...even if it had made him a wee bit late.

He ogled her openly. Folks didn't call him Lucky for nothing. Jeanie was the best-looking old gal in the county. Right now, with her red curls and fiery cheeks to mimic the blaze in her eyes, she reminded him of some Celtic goddess. He couldn't wait to get her in his arms for a polka! He didn't have a pocket watch, but he knew the hoedown was well under way, because he could hear the strains of the fiddle.

The river breeze carried music and laughter past Jeanie too, and she cringed inside, imagining that laughter would soon

be directed at her. Was she really desperate enough to let some yokel who stank like pork grease get close enough for a dance?

“I picked these for you,” he said, thrusting the geraniums at her.

Over his shoulder, she spied the great clumps of uprooted earth that littered her once immaculate flowerbed. She wanted to scream. Was there ever a bigger moron than Lucky Mason?

Notice in the above passage how transitions, internal dialogue (ie, thoughts), and physical business (ie, gestures) cue the reader when a viewpoint shift has taken place. [Disclaimer: I wrote this passage with multiple viewpoint shifts to make a point. I never recommend “jumping heads” more than twice per scene.]

Poorly Transitioned Flashbacks

According to Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (Tenth Edition), a flashback is “an interruption of chronological sequence (as in a film or literary work) by interjection of events of earlier occurrence.” For plotting purposes, flashbacks are written as part of your “sequels” rather than your “scenes.”

Brief flashbacks are great devices for revealing necessary information (usually dramatic action or dialogue) when the action doesn’t warrant a fully fleshed-out scene. Brief flashbacks are also useful when a long-winded scene would slow the pacing of your novel (example: you have too many loose ends to tie up before the climax).

Once you’ve been contracted to write a book and find yourself under some publisher’s word-count limitation, you’ll find flashbacks useful for conserving page space. I often reevaluate my plot around the $\frac{3}{4}$ mark of my book and look for scenes I can condense into brief but “punchy” flashbacks. By sheering the fluff off a minor scene and condensing it into its most vivid and colorful action components, I open up precious page space for lengthier, more important scenes (such as my climax.)

Handle Flashbacks Like Live Action

Get out of the “perfect” tense as soon as possible (ie, the “have”, “has,” “had” verbs.) Be sure to cue the reader that she is entering a flashback with a subtle transition. You also must cue your reader when she is exiting a flashback. A sloppy transition into or out of a flashback is a guaranteed way to lose your reader.

Check out the following passage. Pretty confusing, huh?

Example of a Flashback with Poor Transitions:

Samantha stretched catlike in her bathtub, letting the water lap against her neck. How wonderful to feel the heat easing over her tense shoulders. For the first time in hours, she could relax. She hummed to herself, enjoying the way the sound bounced off the turquoise tiles, enjoying the clean scent of lavender after the grit and grime of the work site. She’d bought the bath salts especially for tonight. Her night with Sean.

“I need to talk to him,” she yelled into her cell phone. The kitchen sink crashed to the ground. The head plumber tossed her a toothy grin. She wanted to curse him, but water was spewing from the busted pipe, and she had to race for the nearest cover.

“It’s no good, Sam. I can’t get Whiggins to change his mind. Look, I’ll help you find another – “

“Forget it, Jim! I’ve spent too many weeks on this renovation.” She could hardly hear herself above the gushing and grunting behind her. “Let me talk to him, okay? I promise, I’ll take all the blame. About the architect, I mean. I know we can stay on budget and still keep the aesthetics of the place.”

He hemmed and hawed and cleared his throat. It was hard to believe that anyone, even Jim, could give her a bigger headache than the plumbers.

“The party is supposed to be a charity gig,” he finally said, sounding a tad too smug for her peace of mind. “You know, anyone who has the money – and an invitation – can come. Maybe I could get you in the back door...if you have dinner with me first.”

“Hershey!” Sam shrieked, noticing that her new shoes were soaking in a pool of puppy urine. She should never have put them on the bathroom floor. “Look what you’ve done. Bad dog!”

The chocolate lab barked happily, hooking his front paws over the rim of her bathtub. She yanked the wash cloth out of his teeth. He was too heavy to push down with one hand, and she found herself twisting like a contortionist to get both hands locked over his collar.

“You don’t mean tonight, do you?” she asked tentatively, breathing a tiny prayer into the phone receiver.

“Why? You don’t have plans with anyone else, do you?”

She indulged herself in a groan, figuring Jim wouldn’t hear it over the clanging of the plumbers’ hammers. If he knew about Sean, then she’d never get a foot in the door with Whiggins. Jim could make or break her career, and he knew it. “Well...I, uh, need to process some paperwork for a new zoning permit.”

“That shouldn’t take all night,” he said in oily tones. “They close the office at six.”

“No!”

Hershey ignored her, scrambling over the rim of the tub and cannonballing onto her thighs. She shrieked again, sputtering on lavender soap spray. *Little termite*. She had half a mind to drown him, except that then she’d have to explain to Sean why his beloved lab was pushing up daisies in her backyard.

Example of a Flashback with Clear Transitions:

(I **bolded** the transition devices)

Samantha stretched catlike in her bathtub, letting the water lap against her neck. How wonderful to feel the heat easing over her tense shoulders. For the first time in hours, she could relax. She hummed to herself, enjoying the way the sound bounced off the turquoise tiles, enjoying the clean scent of lavender after the grit and grime of the work site. She’d bought the bath salts especially for tonight. Her night with Sean.

Unfortunately, there was the little matter of Jim – aka, “The Weasel,” - to deal with first. She scowled **as she recalled** how she’d let herself get cornered into an early

dinner with him.

“I need to talk to your boss,” **she had yelled** at him through her cell phone. Another crisis was evolving at the construction site, thanks to the idiots Jim had hired as plumbers. Even as she spoke, the kitchen sink they’d been trying to install crashed to the ground. The man she’d come to think of as “head idiot” tossed her a toothy grin. She wanted to curse him, but water was spewing from the busted pipe, and she had to race for the nearest cover.

“It’s no good, Sam,” Jim was meanwhile prattling into her phone receiver. “I can’t get Whiggins to change his mind. Look, I’ll help you find another – “

“Forget it, Jim! I’ve spent too many weeks on this renovation.” She could hardly hear herself above the gushing and grunting behind her. “Let me talk to him, okay? I promise, I’ll take all the blame. About the architect, I mean. I know we can stay on budget and still keep the aesthetics of the place.”

He hemmed and hawed and cleared his throat. It was hard to believe that anyone, even Jim, could give her a bigger headache than the plumbers.

“The party is supposed to be a charity gig,” he finally said, sounding a tad too smug for her peace of mind. “You know, anyone who has the money – and an invitation - can come. Maybe I could get you in the back door...if you have dinner with me first.”

A suspicious odor, musty and pungent, **jerked Sam out of her reverie. Glancing at the bathroom door,** she noticed it had been nudged wide. Next she noticed her new shoes. They were soaking in a pool of puppy urine.

“Hershey! Bad dog. Look what you’ve done!” The chocolate lab barked happily, hooking his front paws over the rim of her bathtub. She yanked the wash cloth out of his teeth. He was too heavy to push down with one hand, and she found herself twisting like a contortionist to get both hands locked over his collar.

She found herself entertaining a vision – and the visceral satisfaction – of wrapping her hands around Jim’s throat in a similar way.

“You don’t mean you want to have dinner tonight, do you?” **she’d asked him tentatively, breathing a tiny prayer into the phone receiver.**

“Why? You don’t have plans with anyone else, do

you?”

She indulged herself in a groan, figuring Jim wouldn't hear it over the clanging of the plumbers' hammers. If he knew about Sean, then she'd never get a foot in the door with Whiggins. Jim could make or break her career, and he knew it. “Well...I, uh, need to process some paperwork for a new zoning permit.”

“That shouldn't take all night,” he said in oily tones. “They close the office at six.”

“No!” **Distracted again by the puppy's antics**, Sam found herself wrestling with Hershey. He was doing his demonic best to torment her - this time by trying to heave himself into the tub. “Don't you dare!”

But Hershey ignored her, cannonballing onto her thighs. She shrieked again, sputtering on lavender soap spray. Little termite. She had half a mind to drown him, except that then she'd have to explain to Sean why his beloved lab was pushing up daisies in her backyard.

In the above passage, when I switched from the flashback to live action, notice how I avoided obvious transitions such as “meanwhile” and “suddenly.” (One-word transitions are weak, but they're acceptable if they aren't overused). By re-setting each scene with narrative description and internal dialogue, I not only cued the reader that she'd moved from Sam's bathroom to the construction site, I kept the reader abreast of the escalating conflict in both scenes. I also briefly reiterated where the scene was set. This technique further clarifies live action from flashback.

Notice, too, how the tension in the bathroom starts to parallel the tension at the construction site. Finally, notice how I eliminated as many passive (“have, has, had”) verbs as possible.

A personal note: In a passage as short as our example, I would normally make only one switch from live action to flashback. Sometimes you have to weigh the importance of the information you're “flashing back to” against the events transpiring in the live action. In our example, Sam's struggle with the puppy – while humorous – isn't as important as her conflict with Jim; thus, if this

were a “real” scene, I would have finished recounting the telephone call before transitioning back to the “present” through the ruined-shoes device.

When entering a flashback, use the past perfect tense for the first line and continue it throughout the full paragraph if the construction feels necessary. Once you reach the second paragraph (assuming you gave enough meat to cue the reader that she is now reading a flashback), revert into simple past tense, the same tense you use in a live action scene. This technique is crucial to master if you want to keep weak verbs from slowing the pace of your flashback.

Other Transition Techniques

According to Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (Tenth Edition), the definition of a transition is, “a passage from one state, stage, or place to another: CHANGE; a movement, development or evolution from one form, stage, or style to another.”

Effective writing is smooth writing. Clear transitions are mandatory; in other words, your chapters and their components must fuse in a seamless line. You may write compelling characters, witty dialogue, and breathtaking description, but if your reader can’t figure out how the character got from Point A to Point B (physically *or emotionally*), you’ll lose your reader. Fortunately, we writers have access to all kinds of nifty transition devices.

Transitions of Time

These answer the question, “when.” Single words and phrases can serve this purpose. (But please don’t overuse the one-liners! Be as creative with transitions as you are with the rest of your writing.) Examples follow:

- Next, shortly, finally
- Then, now, since
- Suddenly, following, ultimately
- Soon, next, later
- Meanwhile, eventually
- The rest of the afternoon, he...
- An hour later, she...
- All month he waited for...
- Throughout the dance, (or, “all through the dance”) she...

- By the time she got started...
- The following winter...
- After ten weeks without any luck, she...

Transitions of Place

These answer the question, “where.” Draw upon prepositions to help the reader “picture” the characters moving to a different locale or changing focus/shifting attention:

- (Above, across, adjacent to) the potted plant...
- (Around, before, behind) the 18-wheeler...
- (Below, beneath, beside) the rainbow...
- (Between, beyond, by) the two dormitories...
- (Inside, near, on) the dog’s collar...
- (Outside, over, under) the balcony railing...

Transitions of Point of View

These answer the question, “who.” When more than one character’s ideas and reactions are aired in a story, it’s important to cue the reader whose “head” you’re jumping into. One simple technique is to use the character’s name (as opposed to “he” or “she”.) Linking the name to a thought establishes whose head we’re now in. For example:

- Samantha had a better idea.
- *I’m hardly that kind of girl.* Tina sniffed. (Note: In this example, italics indicate internal dialogue, which readers recognize as “thought.”)
- Joe figured he’d never get a promotion at this rate.

Other “thought” verbs: mused, wondered, considered, guessed, understood, suspected, hypothesized, concluded, doubted, pondered, calculated, deduced, envisioned (as in, “Paul envisioned wringing her neck”), entertained the notion, etc.

PLOTTING PITFALLS: WHY MANUSCRIPTS ARE REJECTED

At writing conferences around the country, I've heard editors say they reject a large percentage of manuscripts because:

- a) the conflicts are so weak, they cannot support a full-length novel, and
- b) the plot is contrived.

As a writer, you must create a story in which your conflict not only escalates throughout the book, it stems from a core problem that exists between the protagonist and the antagonist. For example, say your protagonist is an ambassador assigned to mediate peace between warring alien nations, and your antagonist is an alien terrorist who wishes to assassinate the ambassador.

From this conflict, you can develop a rich tapestry of obstacles to keep your characters from achieving their goals (examples: the ambassador is secretly an advanced telepath who can influence the thought processes of the alien leaders – except when they're in the special metallic chamber where the negotiations take place; the assassin finds out his long-lost son is the ambassador's body guard, and the assassin must choose between his mission and his son.) Drama and suspense arise naturally as you weave conflicts and subplots into your story, taking care that each is somehow tied, even indirectly, to another.

So what happens in rejected manuscripts?

Hopscotching

A new writer will devise a conflict, solve it, and then scramble to find another unrelated conflict to throw at the protagonist and antagonist. This process, called "hopscotching," makes for weak drama. Your book starts to feel more like a series of episodes or short stories rather than an intricate tapestry of intrigue and action.

Sagging Middle

Another plotting pitfall to avoid is the “sagging middle.” Your book may lose the reader’s interest for any number of reasons: little or no character exposition/growth, weak conflicts, secondary characters who take over the protagonist’s story, little or no action, predictable solutions to conflicts (ie, no suspense, lots of coincidence), slow pacing, etc. If your middle sags, you’ve committed the big writing taboo: you’ve lost touch with reader emotion. To keep the reader turning pages, make sure the middle of your book contains a major plot complication. If it doesn’t, your book’s ending is unlikely to deliver the emotional impact you promised in the first three chapters.

Stampede

In complicated plots, be sure you avoid what editors call, “the stampede.” In this situation, the plot is usually so convoluted that the author runs out of page space before she can tie up all her loose threads. As a result, she rushes to address reader questions by jamming all the answers into a couple of pages at the end. This problem is avoided by remembering to solve the least most important conflict first, the next least important conflict second, and so on, until only the key or pivotal conflict remains to be solved at the end (ie, your climax).

Bloat

For books that have simpler plots, “bloat” or “padding” can pose a problem. As the name implies, bloated books are full of unnecessary detail, usually related to descriptions of furniture, flora, fauna, clothing, transportation, etc. Most authors pad their prose because they’re aware, only if intuitively, that they don’t have enough plot or conflict to carry their novel.

Background Dumping

Another type of “bloat” is background dumping. In this case, you pad your story with trivial information about a character’s past, the history of the town, or instructions for loading a musket, dressing wounds, performing an autopsy, etc. Many authors become enamoured of their research (Example: “I spent six months studying ancient Sanskrit in Tibet. My readers are going to see what I learned, by God!”) The trouble is, your readers *don’t* want to see what you learned. If they did, they’d be reading college texts. Remember: research can add depth and texture to your scenes. However, use it in brush strokes.

Weak Resolution

For those of you who consider yourself dynamite plot writers, be sure your explosive set-up doesn't end with a whimper. A weak resolution will make your reader throw your book against the wall. Who would believe the following: a 5th generation cattleman, after 400 pages of all-out war to keep his ranch out of the clutches of a subdivision developer, decides in the last chapter to sell everything to a shopping mall builder. Don't think you can sweep under the carpet the cattleman's love of land, nobility of character, and grief over a dying age with an offhand comment like, "I never really wanted to be a cattleman. It was Pa's idea. I think I'll become an astronaut." The reader won't believe it – unless you've convinced him with strong hints from the beginning that your hero is ripe for such an enormous about-face. Keep in mind that a 180 degree shift in a character's values and belief systems is difficult to substantiate in any story. The more intense your conflict is, the more difficult your solution will be. Thus, in early manuscripts, you might be better off choosing a less intense core conflict.

Bolt-out-of-the-Blue Ending

A resolution that strikes like a bolt out of the blue (see example in above paragraph) is another resolution to avoid. If you're going to write a surprise ending – believe it or not! – you have to drop hints so a reader can look back and say to himself, "I should have seen that coming." How-to-books suggest foreshadowing these endings by weaving into your story at least three good clues to alert a reader that "author mischief" is likely to arise in the final pages. These clues will make your surprise ending plausible. Note: If you'd like to try your hand at a surprise ending, study the short stories by O. Henry. He's the universally acclaimed master of trick endings.

PICK UP THE PACE

The quickest way to lose your reader is to bore her. No news story there, huh? But while you, the writer, may consciously understand this idea, you may be unconsciously pumping your pages full of tranquilizers (or "laudanum," as we historical writers might say.)

After reading countless manuscripts by unpublished authors, I can say with authority that pacing techniques are tough to grasp for beginners. In fact, I find that most students master character goals, motivations, and conflicts long before they've figured out how to eliminate their manuscript's sagging middle - or sagging proposal, for that matter. Part of this problem, of course, stems from the typical newbie attitude that every word is golden (ie, an act of Congress couldn't make them trim a paragraph.) Picture the average writing student, cross-eyed with frustration when she sees my red pen bleeding all over her page. "What do you MEAN, I need to cut my 10 pages on candlemaking?" the student argues. "You told me to RESEARCH. Now you're telling me I can't include all that great, that's-the-way-it-was info on wick-trimming!"

Uh . . . yeah. Wick-trimming's great stuff. Save it for your historical treatise on 'Light Fixtures through the Ages.' But if you're writing an historical novel, my friends, slash it mercilessly.

Now I realize that for many an aspiring author, just the thought of 50,000, or even 100,000 words, is enough to make you turn purple and twitch. "How am I ever gonna fill up 400 pages without wick-trimming tips?" cries your panicked brain.

Trust me. If you've done your job, fleshing out your characters and weaving riveting subplots through your chapters, you will have more than enough "stuff" for 100,000 words. In fact, you'll probably find yourself sacrificing some of your pearls of wisdom rather than leaving the editing up to the evil Word-Count Monster that perches on the desk of every New York editor.

Now that I've prepared you for the daunting task ahead, I'd like to insert a caveat here. Slow pacing absolutely does have its uses. In fact, good books will alternate between fast and slower-paced scenes, giving the reader a mental "breather." The following section discusses the pros and cons of slow and fast pacing.

When to Use Slow Pacing

- To establish tension or suspense
- To set mood or atmosphere
- To describe romantic or sexual actions
- For long, reflective passages (ie, internal dialogue and narrative.)

Pacing to Set Mood

Passages designed to set the scene and establish mood/atmosphere tend to be more slowly paced than passages of dialogue and dramatic narration. In slowly paced scenes, you have time to throw in some of that mouth-watering research you spent the better part of your weekend digging up on the Internet (or in the library). In scenes specifically designed to set mood or atmosphere, the judicious use of background won't bog down your prose, tripping up the reader as it tends to do in scenes of dialogue or high action. So enjoy your mood-setting scenes. Relish the opportunity to wax poetic.

In the example you are about to read, I've supplied the first draft of a paragraph from my unpublished medieval romance/fantasy, *Wolfspell* (working title). At this crucial turning-point in the novel, I've taken the heroine away from all she holds dear – her home, the forest, and her animal friends – so that I can contrast her idyllic (if isolated) life in the woods with the life she is about to encounter among mankind.

Example:

Rhiannon's first glimpse of Castle Wolfden came at dawn. It sat on a hill overlooking the valley and its cottages. Battlements rose from its walls; beneath them, she could spy only one link to the outside world: a gate. Above the moat, an occasional chimney smoked. The tower windows gazed down at her like demon eyes. She imagined those eyes were laughing at her, because she had forsaken the world of spirit for a man.

The above paragraph isn't terrible; however, it isn't great either. It fails to convey the contrast between Rhiannon's world and the hero's world, mainly because it lacks "atmosphere." Up until this point in the novel, the heroine has hidden from men for fear that they would burn her as a witch. She travels to the castle because the hero has begged her to use her knowledge of herbs to heal his father. She agrees reluctantly because while she loves him and wants to please him, she also feels guilty for forsaking her pagan gods on the most important pagan festival of the year (the Feast

of the Dead, aka, Samhain), and, of course, she's afraid of the Christian clergy who dwell beyond the haven of her cave. However, you wouldn't know any of this just by reading the first paragraph. None of Rhiannon's angst is reflected in her observations of the castle.

I knew I could do better in this scene. In fact, I *wanted* to do better. So in my second draft, I drew upon vivid verbs, historical detail, and various writing techniques (including alliteration, simile, and metaphor) to make the castle ominous. My goal was to foreshadow the obstacles/conflicts Rhiannon will experience there. (The changes are indicated in **bold italics**.)

Rhiannon's first glimpse of Castle Wolfden came with the ***pink rays*** of dawn. ***Gray, grim, and grand***, it ***loomed*** over the ***pastoral*** valley and its cottages ***like some gargyle of granite***. Battlements ***and barbicans bristled so fiercely*** from its walls that she could spy only one link to the outside world: ***a spiked, iron gate***. Above the moat, an occasional chimney ***belched snakes of smoke, a vision that reminded Rhiannon of fire-loving Loki, the God of Mischief and Lies***. More unsettling yet were the windows, ***two slits of blazing light that glared*** down from the ***donjon*** towers like the ***reddened*** eyes of some demon. Rhiannon imagined that those demon eyes were laughing at her, because she had forsaken the ***Samhain spirits*** for an earth-bound man.

In my opinion, the first paragraph falls flat because few sensory details are supplied, and the few that are supplied pale in comparison with the ones used in the second draft. The tricks of the trade I used in the second draft were designed to hook the reader's emotions. Hopefully, you felt a sense of doom when you read the second paragraph. If you even worried a bit about our heroine, then I accomplished my job as a writer.

When to Use Fast Pacing

- To establish urgency
- To give the reader a "jolt" after long, flowing passages of prose
- To transition through lengthy passages of time.

Tips for Picking Up Your Pace:

- Mix dialogue with narrative
- Make monologues short; break them up with physical actions/gestures or interruptions from other characters

- Refrain from repeating information (even if you say it with different words, or from another character’s point of view, folks!)
- Avoid wasting space on trivial events (such as comings and goings)
- Avoid tired phrases (jaws of death, twinkling eyes, black as night, etc.)
- Avoid gobs of adverbs and adjectives (some new writers will use two and three modifiers PER NOUN. Scary, huh?)
- Mercilessly slash all trivial conversations (see the section on Dialogue for details about what constitutes “trivial”)

All these tips sound good in theory, right? But how do you spot glutted passages in your writing?

Okay, there’s no single “right” way to edit a scene. Trial and error - not to mention an occasional objective read from a savvy writer - will help you spot “fat” in your prose. Keep in mind that some author’s styles are minimalist, while other’s border on purple. Genre also plays a hand in this: romantic fiction, for instance, is ten times more wordy than, say, male adventure novels, because romance readers adore lush descriptions and evocative passages that make them emote. Male readers want to read spine-tingling action.

If it makes you feel better, any editor who’s worth writing for will negotiate over the passages you don’t want to condense, as long as you present a solid, logical reason for writing the scene the way you did. Just be sure you’re not fighting a small battle when a bigger battle looms on the horizon: for example, she wants you to combine three of your secondary characters into one, for instance. (And yes, this has happened to me!)

Action Scenes

Now, before I take you to the following example, I want you to understand I went hog-wild to prove a point. This “action scene” (see tips on fast pacing, above) loses its urgency because I failed to rein in my pen. I follow this example with the passage that eventually did become part of the published version of *Texas Wildcat*, my third novel. Notice how much shorter the final version is!

Example of Poorly Paced Action:

In the following example, heat lightning has struck the drought-stricken sheep & goat ranch of our heroine, Bailey McShane. Our hero, cattle rancher Zack Rawlins, is on hand trying to help her save her livestock. Suddenly, the windmill is struck by lightning.

"Bailey!" It sounded like Zack's voice coming through the smoke. "Bailey, honey, oh my God, look out! Run! You have to run!"

A foreboding creaking echoed through the inferno, and Bailey blinked back smoke, straining to listen. She thought she could hear wood splintering somewhere above her, and she felt her stomach knot. Could that be the windmill? Or was there some tree limb cracking high above her? Even though Zack had told her to run, she didn't dare, because she was uncertain which path would be safest. She glanced up. To her horror, she saw the tower topple, flaming toward her. She screamed, having no other choice but to throw up her arms to protect her vulnerable head as the tower crashed, miraculously bouncing off the fence, not her. From every direction at once, it seemed, embers showered down upon the enclosure, and the tongues of the fire climbed skyward forming great smoking walls. Her heart sinking, she realized she was now trapped with all of her male goats.

Edited Version, as it Appeared in the Published Version of Texas Wildcat:

"Bailey!" It was Zack's voice, raised in near panic. "Bailey, look out!"

A foreboding creaking suddenly gave way to the splintering of wood. Bailey glanced up in time to see the tower topple in flames. She could do little more than scream, throwing her arms over her head. The tower crashed, miraculously bouncing off the fence, not her. Embers showered the enclosure. Fire whooshed skyward in walls.

She was trapped with her bucks.

Reasoning Behind Edits:

People in life-or-death situations don't have time to reason, ask themselves questions, or carry on extended conversations. They react instinctively. As a result, all of the internal dialogue in the first passage can be slashed.

As you write an action scene, imagine yourself as a camera, zooming in on the most riveting part of the tableau. Yes, thousands of things can be discussed to add to the atmosphere: the brewing storm, the bleating goats,

the rips and tears in our heroine's blue jeans, etc. But none of these things conveys the urgency our central character is feeling. Thus, to intensify your imagery, paint with light brush strokes. Give the reader only enough information to form a picture, and keep your writing focused on the "action" that moves the plot forward.

Choose powerful but succinct verbs (ie, "fire climbed" became "fire whooshed.") Eliminate weak or lengthy phrases (ie, "all of her male goats" became "her bucks.") Another trick: be sure you aren't TELLING us something (ie, "to her horror") and then SHOWING us the same thing (ie, "...The tower topple[d] in flames. She could do little more than scream..."). In fiction, showing is ALWAYS more powerful, so slash the "telling" sequences first.

Now go forth and tackle your own prose.

Happy slashing!

DIALOGUE: AN ESSENTIAL SKILL

There's good and bad news about dialogue. The bad news is: it's an essential skill. Your writing needs a combination of dialogue and narrative to be effective, not to mention interesting. The good news is: it's easy. You've been creating "dialogue" all of your life. Granted, you probably weren't writing down the dialogue you created because you were too busy enjoying yourself in a conversation.

Become a Good Listener

I know, I know, you're a writer. You use your imagination. But to become a good writer of dialogue, you must become a good listener. Take note of people's speaking behavior. Spend time analyzing how you and your family/friends express themselves during different situations, including telephone conversations. Buy yourself a tape recorder or mini spiral notebook and make notes to yourself - or record full conversations for future analysis.

Dialogue Patterns Change With Mood

While you're conducting your research, the first thing you'll notice is how your speech patterns vary based on your emotions: when you are angry, you speak in short bursts and sentence fragments; you probably interrupt the other person. Angry people clench their fists, jut their jaws, thrust their necks forward in a belligerent fashion, etc. Males might even get intimidatingly close, leaning their upper body forward to threaten the other "upstart" male. (Where do you think the saying, "Get out of my face!" came from?)

If you are comforting an upset friend, however, you're likely to speak in longer, "soothing" sentences, choosing diplomatic phrases and open, non-threatening facial gestures (ie, nods of understanding, forehead puckered in concern, soft eye contact). You might even be inclined to touch or stroke the person you're trying to comfort.

If you are in a hurry or stressed, your speech will be rushed and clipped. If you observe a new employee meeting your boss for the first time, the employee's speech might be halting because she's nervous, or it may be breathlessly fast (ie,

diarrhea of the mouth) with a lot of repetition and self-deprecating behavior, including inappropriate/nervous laughter.

As you can see from the above examples, dialogue patterns change based on the mood, temperament, and personality of the character. A character will also change his inflection and the speed at which he talks as the situation becomes more urgent or stressful.

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF DIALOGUE

What purpose does dialogue serve in fiction? Well, dialogue can set the tone; develop, strengthen, and deepen characterization; build conflict between characters; forward the plot (ie, by revealing important information or misleading other characters, etc.); and all of the above.

Writing Dynamic Conversation

The great irony of dialogue is that while characters must sound like real people, you won't be able to reproduce "real" speech exactly. For instance, people tend to talk at the same time; they tend to use filler words, such as "um," "ya know," and "er;" they often repeat themselves (to the annoyance of their listener!) or distract themselves and their listener by launching off on tangents that have nothing to do with the current topic of conversation. In fiction, you can give your reader a taste of this realistic behavior, but it must be done sparingly because interruptions, "um's" and "ya know's," and other dialogue foibles are hard to read because they're so confusing.

Remember these things when constructing dialogue:

- Give each character a distinct voice (achieved primarily through word choice). You might also deepen characterization by giving a character an idiomatic expression, such as Gomer Pyle's, "Golly!" or Scarlet O'Hara's, "I'll think about that tomorrow."
- Approximate real speech. In fiction, your dialogue will be quicker and more direct, conveying a sense of spontaneity. It will also get to the point of the scene. Avoid having your characters waste page space with line after line of trivial "greeting" behavior, or "weather" conversations, etc., unless you are deliberately seeking to build suspense or obstruct your protagonist in achieving his scene goal.

- You may use some trivial conversation as a device to show a character is evasive, nervous, foolish, etc. To make this point with the reader, however, dialogue alone is not always sufficient. Be sure to include facial expressions and physical gestures that contradict what the character is saying.

Example:

“It is so good to see you, Wilbur,” she said, shaking his hand with a nervous smile.

He couldn’t help but notice how she avoided his eyes.

- Use dialogue to convey SIGNIFICANT passages of your characters' conversations. (And your characters should not be talking unless a point is to be conveyed.)

Here's an example of what NOT to do:

"Hello, my name is Robin. I'm your waitress this evening."

"Hi, Robin," Greg said.

"Yeah, hi," Jenny chimed in.

Robin smiled politely. "Would you like me to tell you about our specials?"

"Nah."

"I don't think we're going to eat dinner tonight," Greg added.

"We just want dessert."

"Oh. Well, I can get the dessert tray - "

"Nevermind. Just tell us what's on it.

"Yeah," Jenny said. "I think that's best."

"Okay. Well, let's see. We have peach, um, cobbler, cherry pie, and that uh, that really sweet white icing stuff in a pastry roll.

Um, I can't remember the uh, you know, it's name - "

"Canneloni?"

"No, *canoli*," Greg interrupted.

"Uh, something like that right," Robin said, nervously clicking the top of her pen. "And we have uh...ice cream. I think - "

"What kind?" Jenny asked.

"Um, I don't know. I'll have to, uh, check. I think we ran out of chocolate."

"No chocolate?"

"That's fine by me," Jenny said. "I'm allergic."

"Maybe some, um, Spumoni would be good then - "

"Jen swells up like a blow fish," Greg teased.
" - Or some, um, Neapolitan - " Robin continued.
"Greg!"
" - Or how about French vanilla?" Robin doggedly droned on.
"Aw, Jen, I'm just kidding."
"Hey, wait a minute. Did you say you had peach cobbler?" Jenny asked, flipping through the menu.
"Uh, yeah."
"I don't want any gross..." Greg made a face. "It reminds me of vomit!"
"That is so gross, Greg!"
"Isn't that what I said?"

As you can see from the above example, this conversation goes nowhere. It's boring. No significant plot information is revealed. The characterizations aren't deepened. No real obstacle establishes conflict, suspense, or tension. It's not funny, clever, or unique. In other words: your reader doesn't care. Sure, it might be realistic that two people routinely go through this rigamarole to order dessert at a restaurant, but the reader has probably been through the same experience herself. The author can gloss over these painstaking details, and the reader won't feel deprived, because she's "been there, done that."

Here's a better way of handling this scene:

After Jenny and Greg ordered cherry pie ala mode and two forks to share it, Jenny gulped a bolstering breath and brought up the topic she'd been dreading all evening. "Greg, look. I know how much this promotion means to you. But I'm not happy about moving to Alaska."

Obviously, in the above example, the stage is set for real dramatic conflict, and I didn't bore the reader for a page to create it. Keep this same technique in mind when writing telephone conversations: if you can't summarize the conversation and you believe you absolutely must reproduce the conversation, spare the reader the chitchat and get to the heart of the conflict.

Developing Characters through Dialogue

Before you write a single word, decide on the speech pattern of your characters. A farmer will speak differently than a professor of philosophy. You must be certain that your main characters do not sound alike. Readers accept poor grammar for secondary characters more readily than they do for a protagonist; however, the poor grammar and/or dialect of secondary characters should vary from character to character so that each is an individual with its own opinions, preferences, and educational and/or ethnic backgrounds.

One way to keep characters "in character" is by asking yourself, "Would s/he say that?" Remember: your characterizations are established by what your fictional people say, the length of their sentences, and the choice of their words. Good dramatic dialogue is multilayered. It includes body language, emotion, direct meaning, parallel meaning, and evasiveness. Dialogue should bring us close to the characters and their conflicts. If a conversation pattern - verbal abuse, for instance - occurs many times, and showing the character as an abuser is the main point of these conversations, don't give us all the instances. Give us one dramatic scene, when it counts, and summarize the others.

Forwarding the Plot with Dialogue

Characters supply the emotions behind your plot. In other words, they're the reason/motivation behind your choice to place a scene in your book. When a story seems to be moving too slowly, check for dialogue. You may be "telling" the reader through narration what you need to be "showing" through dialogue.

Because scenes are not weighted equally, choose dialogue for scenes where characters must be shown in conflict with each other. (Remember how we discussed that a character's personality is best revealed under stress?) A good rule of thumb is to add dialogue to scenes where you must show the reader how a character will react to something.

Note: Dialogue isn't as effective as a transition between scenes; for less important passages, use narration to transition the reader into the next scene.

Speaking of narration, if you need to drop in background information (examples: history, philosophy, biology, etc.), put the information in narrative (unless your characters are historians, philosophers, biologists, etc., and would legitimately talk about such things.)

Here's an example of unnatural, information-giving dialogue:

“I saw 52,683 Yankees, sir,” the scout shouted, reining in his lathered horse. “They were marching on Petersburg, Virginia, under the command of four-star General Ulysses S. Grant. The Federals, in their blue uniforms, could be seen in the dust and tumult of the pine trees they were felling. Their earthworks are known throughout the south as marvels of engineering, sir. Like they were at Vicksburg, the earthworks will be used for laying siege to the city.”

In the above example, the precise number of Yankees is unbelievable. Only by sitting and counting every one could the scout know such a thing - and he wouldn't have had time for that. Any Confederate stationed in Virginia in 1865 would know full well where Petersburg is. He would also know who Grant is, so the full use of Grant's name, with rank, is unnatural conversation.

In addition, Confederates all knew that Yankees wore blue uniforms - why would a scout bring up this intelligence when he had far more important news to share?

Finally, any student of war knows the purpose of earthworks; for the messenger to tell his general that earthworks will be used to lay siege to Petersburg - as they were used at Vicksburg, yet! - is ridiculous and condescending.

Here's another example of unnatural, information-giving dialogue:

“You know, Bob,” Tom said to his brother, “our parents were married in 1946, and I was born six months later.”

The above example doesn't work because family skeletons, such as the one noted above, would be old news among brothers. Now, if Tom were confiding the scandal to his new girlfriend, that might be a different matter. To keep your dialogue dynamic, keep the conversation focused on the important information. Let it create tension.

Writing Dialect

Dialect is a wonderful tool; but like any other tool, it can be overused and therefore grow distracting. Choose a few key phrases to show that a character is speaking in dialect, rather than trying to recreate the entire speech pattern. The reader will start to "hear" the dialect on her own. You don't need to render every word in dialect. In fact, you slow down your reader and confuse her if you do.

Create the illusion of dialect through the rhythm of your writing. Different ethnicities speak English with different cadences; try to create this rhythm with your sentence structures.

Here's Scottish dialect from my third book, Texas Wildcat:

"I willna be going to the meeting, lass." His gaze slid uncomfortably toward her before he hung the feed bag for the mule. "I have to be about my packing."

"Packing?"

"Aye. I'll be leaving in the morning. Maggie's got consumption." Bailey sucked in her breath. "Oh no, Mac. Why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugged, concentrating on the curry brush he was running over the mule's hide. "Ye had other things on yer mind."

She felt her cheeks burn. God forgive her. She hadn't been paying much attention to Mac of late.

"I'm sorry," she whispered hoarsely. "I had no idea."

"Of course not, lass. I dinna tell ye."

"No, I mean... I'm sorry I wasn't here for you when you needed me."

His brush strokes faltered. Then he donned his classic, Rock-of-Gibraltar expression. "There's nothing ye could have done," he said gravely. "And I willna have ye taking on the guilt."

Avoid Radical Spellings

When writing dialect, avoid radically altering your spelling. Misspelled dialogue is very difficult to read. Check out the following passage. How many times (or how slowly) did you have to read it to figure out what was being said?

Example of Radical Spelling:

"Eet ees so varree nice to meet yew, mam'selle. Let me cahree zee luggaje for yew. Theese way, *s'il vous plait*. The sheep is varee full. Yew do not mind walkeen up ze gangway weeth me? *Bon*. Eet ees such an 'onnoore to have zee celebriteez at zee cahseeno for zee chareetee ball!"

You might try variations on dialects, making up your own "version." For example, nobody remembers how people in Utah spoke in the 1880s; you can make up your own idiosyncratic expressions or speech patterns. Just be consistent throughout the course of the novel.

The “Drawl” in Dialogue

To evoke a drawl, rely on speech pattern and cadence, don't write dialect in which you triple vowels or consonants. (Example: a Texan might say, “They went and made you a genuine star!” whereas a Yankee would say, “They made you a star!” FYI: Texans are universally known for hyperbole: To describe courage, a Texan might say, “That boy isn’t afraid to face hell alone with a bucket of water!” While whimsical speech is useful to convey character, avoid over-doing it.)

You might also reflect a drawl by choosing two or three words in which you regularly alter the spelling, but again, keep in mind that less is more. For example, in my Texas series, I implied a drawl by dropping the “g” off of “darlin” and adding additional words to the sentences to imply a longer, “drawn out” style of talking; however, you will see that I did not drop every “g” off of every “ing” word. It would have made the dialogue too ponderous. I also carefully researched Texas slang and made sure I added a couple of “Texasisms,” particularly from the Old West era.

Here's an example of the speech and thoughts of Texan characters from my first novel, Texas Outlaw:

The sound of a priming rifle jarred Cord's spine. He froze in mid-turn.

"I'd just as soon shoot you as look at you, mister, so keep your hands high."

Fancy laughed, the sound warm and sweet with triumph. "Why, Sheriff Applegate. What took you so long?"

Cord ground his teeth. If she thought a swaggering, grand-daddy of a sheriff was going to keep her out of a federal reformatory, she had another think coming.

"Blast it, Applegate. It's Cord. Cord Rawlins. You going to let me turn around?"

"Cord?" The sheriff sounded skeptical. "I heard you were scalped by Comanches."

"Then you heard wrong."

"Hellfire." Amusement crept into Applegate's gruff voice. "I shoulda known you'd be too ornery to die. Turn around, son, and let me look at you."

Cord found himself grinning as he obeyed. Fourteen years ago, he'd hunted cattle rustlers alongside Clem Applegate. A prosperous rancher, the man had been a law unto himself in Tarrant

County. Then the war had come, and with it confiscation -- or Reconstruction, as the Yankees liked to call it. Clem had lost his livestock, his spread, and just about everything else, except for his belly.

Yep, Applegate was still as wide and red as a barn, with whiskers big enough to match. Of course, the sheriff's beard was a little grayer now, his brow a little more lined, but Cord felt certain that the sixty-year-old lawman could still shoot out the eye of a rattler at fifty paces.

"So they went and made a U.S. Marshal out of you, eh?" Applegate was studying the star on Cord's vest. "That explains the gunfighter my deputy saw skulking outside the saloon. 'Course, it don't explain what you're doing 'round these parts. Ain't seen hide nor hair of you for two years, Cord, not since that wife of yours passed on."

Cord stiffened, feeling Fancy's speculative gaze upon him. He wished Applegate had kept his mouth shut about Bethany.

"I'm here to make an arrest."

"An arrest, eh? Hot damn." Applegate stepped forward and menaced Turk. "What did the mule skinner do this time? Lynch a lawman? Drown a baby?"

"I didn't do nuthin'!" Turk wailed.

"Sure you did, you stinking heap of cow turd. I just didn't find out about it yet."

Cord shook his head. He was used to Applegate's style of peace-keeping. "Turk's all yours, sheriff. I came for Miss Holleday."

"You came to arrest Fancy?" Applegate's brows rose, then he donned a lopsided grin. "Aw, what did she do, son? Steal your heart?"

The crowd behind Applegate dissolved into back-slapping and guffaws. Cord felt his ears burn to know that his brothers were probably laughing with everyone else. He tugged a wanted poster from his pocket and thrust it at the sheriff.

"Train robbery, eh?" Applegate tossed the paper aside, and it fluttered to rest beneath Fancy's chair. "Looks like you're roping the wrong steer, son. Or in this case, the wrong heifer. Miss Fancy don't look nothing like that wanted poster. She's purdier."

"Why, thank you, sheriff."

"Sure 'nuff, sweet thing."

In the above example, I chose specific phrases and some slang to help me convey the regional dialect: “round these parts,” “hide nor hair,” “reckon,” “heifer,” etc. I also spattered the sheriff’s grammar with “ain’t” and other misuses (example: “rattler,” “purdier,” “nuff”) to indicate that while the sheriff was street smart, he hadn’t graduated from any University.

Poor Grammar in Dialogue

The use of incorrect (but readable) grammar is another technique to deepen characterization.

Here’s another example, this one from my fifth novel and Doubleday Book Club selection, Always Her Hero:

Eden gazed toward the Kissing Booth. As the crowd shifted again, her seventy-five-year old aunt could be seen stomping her feet and hollering at the top of her lungs. Claudia had climbed onto the booth’s counter, her dungarees billowing in the wind, her iron-gray hair frizzing in the humidity. Apparently she was heckling any bachelor too foolish not to give the booth a wide berth.

As Eden approached, she could hear her aunt in action.

“Git me my shotgun,” Claudia fussed at Sera, who grimaced, reaching for the barrel the way she might have reached for horse dung. Claudia snatched it from her hand. “Now git outta the way. I’ll show you fillies how to rope a stallion.”

Eden and Sera exchanged wary looks.

“Hey!” Claudia thumped the gunstock on the counter for attention. “You there in the tight britches. Yeah, *you* know who I mean, Four Eyes. You didn’t put them pants on to be ignored, I’ll wager. Get your pretty mug over here for a kiss.”

The sobbuster straightened his spectacles, took one look at Claudia, and fled.

She scowled. “Dang. That boy must be deaf as well as blind. Bad breeding stock.”

Sera’s nails dug into Eden’s arm. She was trying so hard not to laugh, she looked like she might cry.

“Hey!” Claudia bellowed next at the blacksmith’s boy. “I got a round of buckshot with your name on it, son. Git yer big, brawny self over here fer a kiss!”

Tips on Writing Speech for Children

Again, rather than misspelling words to show a young child's speech, rely on cadence and word choice. Failing that, reproduce a child's logic. That's often sufficient.

Here's an example of 7-year-old Merrilee's speech from the second novel in my Texas Trilogy, Texas Lover:

She seemed startled by his appearance and retreated from his arms. "I'm sorry I woke you, Uncle Wes."

He smiled to reassure her. "You didn't, honey."

She bowed her head, staring shamefully at the ground, and he gently touched her shoulder.

"Merrilee, why are you crying?"

"I had another nightmare," she said in a tiny voice.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She sniffled, nodding. "It was about the bad men. The ones who came and burned our house."

Wes felt a sickness start in his gut. It burned its way to his heart. "That sounds scary. What did the bad men do?"

She shuddered, at last shifting a few inches closer. "They hurt Mama. And Papa too."

She slipped her hand into his.

"Is that why you're afraid?"

She nodded again, at last meeting his eyes. "Miss Rorie said I would be safe here, that the bad men wouldn't come back. But Marshal Dukker comes here, and he's a bad man."

Wes frowned at this intelligence. He didn't like the idea of Dukker frightening Merrilee. "Why do you think he's a bad man?" he asked gently.

"Because Marshal Dukker came here when Shae was away. He asked Miss Rorie to marry him, and when she said no, he yelled at her and called her bad names. He pushed her and tried to kiss her, just like the bad men did to Mama. Only Mama fell down," she whispered anxiously. "Then the bad men fell down with her, and Mama told me to run away."

Bile rose to Wes's throat. Pulling the child into his arms, he held her fiercely to his heart. "I won't let that happen to Miss Rorie, Merrilee. I promise."

Tips on Writing Speech for Children (cont):

In the above example, notice several things. First, to show that Merrilee is reluctant to discuss her nightmare, I make her evasive. She only answers the exact question she is asked until she gathers the courage to tell the full story, at which point, the cadence is fast, rushed, urgent. She never says the word “rape” - the word wasn’t in her vocabulary - and yet the reader understands what violent act Merrilee is describing.

Secondly, notice that Wes (the hero) speaks at her level, choosing childish words (“That sounds very scary. What did the bad men do?”). I briefly “dumbed him down” in an effort to make him seem more sensitive, both to Merrilee and to the reader. By having Wes speak on her level, it gave Merrilee the motivation (the feeling of safety) to talk.

Tips for the Historical Writer

If you’re writing a period novel, take care not to put into dialogue words that would never be used during that era (or in that culture). For instance, during the 19th Century, the North and South referred to the Civil War as “The War of Secession” or “The War Between the States.” They did not refer to it as “The Civil War.” This term is modern.

In another example, I once had an editor slap my hand because my 19th Century heroine described the hero as “raunchy”. “Raunchy” was coined in the 1920s.

Obviously, the earlier your book is set, the fewer words you have to play with. Don’t make yourself nuts. Put “iffy” words in narrative, where the purists are less likely to object to them. For instance, Chinese firecrackers were often called fire rockets, and the term “rocket” was in use as early as 1611 (according to my dictionary.) So, theoretically, my 19th Century Western hero could use the term rocket -- assuming that he was worldly enough to know about the Chinese in San Francisco! (If he’d been raised in a cave, “rocket” probably wouldn’t be part of his vocabulary.)

When in doubt, consult a good dictionary that gives you the origin of the words you want to use. I recommend the Oxford English Dictionary or the English Dialect Dictionary. In a pinch, I’ve used the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary.

When to Use Dialogue "Tags"

One of the common misconceptions new writers have is that the word, "said," should be avoided. Thus, they will go to extraordinary lengths to tag their dialogue with words that can feel melodramatic to the reader.

It's okay on occasion to say your heroine shrieked or your hero growled, but don't overuse such verbs. Also avoid running to your thesaurus for alternatives to "he said," "he thought" or "he asked." While some variation is acceptable, strong verb tags distract from the dialogue. Skillfully written dialogue will indicate to your reader the mood of the character. It's unnecessary, for example, to write, "You're a jerk!" Jim yelled angrily.

The exclamation point (above) is sufficient to convey the heat of the moment. However, if you decide you need to tag the above example, "yelled," is enough. The adverb, "angrily," becomes overkill. (A note on exclamations points: less is more. Your characters appear childish or melodramatic if you end every other sentence with an exclamation point. My rule of thumb is no more than three per page. I've had editors whittle away those pesky punctuation marks to still fewer, so take heed.)

Another way to avoid tags is to intersperse dialogue with gestures, facial expressions, and internal dialogue. Obviously, this technique is useful for deepening characterization. It can also show the reader that the speaker is being evasive or dishonest.

Here's an example in which no tag is used:

"Oh, I would love to babysit Cindy tonight." Mary grimaced into the telephone, her mind racing. She hated it when Peg called at the last minute. Mary had nothing more exciting planned for the evening than watching CNN, but Peg didn't have to know that. "Cindy's a real doll, all right. Never any trouble. But, uh, you see, sis, tonight's not good. Why? Oh. Well..." Mary glanced at her medicine cabinet, and inspiration struck. "I have a headache. The worst kind. You know how it is. Whenever my sinuses act up, I want to curl up in bed and die."

Obscenities and Oaths

Oaths and swear words are part of every day language; there's no shame in using them. However, certain words are absolutely forbidden in certain genres. In a sweet romance, for instance, you'll never see the "F" word. And if you think, because this is the New Millennium, that your readers are worldly enough not to be offended by gutter talk, think again. I got a flaming letter in the Year 2000 from a reader who said she'd thoroughly enjoyed *Scoundrel for Hire* until she got to Chapter 15. "Rest assured," she wrote, "I will never read one of your books again!"

Mystified, I went back to read that chapter -- and remembered what had happened during my writing process. Due to certain restrictions that my publisher had placed upon me, I was forced to introduce two villainous, secondary characters quickly, so I could get on with the more crucial task of forwarding the plot. I chose to stereotype them, filling their dialogue with poor grammar, ignorant assumptions, and selected curse words. While most readers forgive vulgarity when it's put in the mouth of villains, this particular reader did not.

That's why it's always a good idea to be conservative in your use of obscenities. Keep in mind that the foulest words in the English language wind up routinely on television and in movies. As a result, their shock value is gone. Perhaps that's an advantage for us writers. In real life, people resort to obscenities when they need an easy solution (ie, they can't come up with a brilliant one-liner). But you can put into your characters' mouths all the things you'd wished you'd had the nerve or the wit to say in a tense or insulting situation. So give your protagonist something smart or quirky to say. You'll be deepening his characterization.

Another alternative to avoiding flaming fan mail: make up your own swear words. For instance, I've seen authors of medieval books use "God's teeth" or "God's blood." The reader gets the point.

HOW TO WRITE HUMOR

I've had more than one student say to me (with a groan), "Your books are so funny! How do you make your books funny?" I usually say something succinct and witty like, "Uh..."

Because the truth is, I've never been trained to write humor. I never took a course or workshop on it; I've never read a book about it. I learned the hard way: by stumbling into my own style. (See. There's hope for *everybody*.) I promise you, *gobs* of books have been written on the topic; check out the library. Or Amazon.com. Or your favorite neighborhood bookstore. In fact, I recommend buying at least one good book on humor writing for your reference shelf.

But in the meantime, since all you have is *me* for instruction, I'll pass along some of the things I've learned over the years through trial and error:

Study Your Favorite Authors

To hone your own humor-writing skills, drag out books with scenes that you thought were particularly funny and analyze why you laughed. Was the humor dry? Exaggerated? Situational? Chances are, your humor will be similar in style to that of your favorite authors, so start learning from their successes. My favorite humorists are Mark Twain, James Thurber, and Dave Barry. You'll probably recognize touches of their style in my own writing.

Less is More

When writing humor, less is more. The more you try to flag humorous passages for your reader (example, by making your character laugh uproariously), the faster you'll fall on your rear. Watch how veteran comedians like Jay Leno set up a situation and deliver the punch line. Do the same thing in your writing. If your reader doesn't get your humor - and believe me, some won't - shoving it down her throat isn't going to make her think you're any funnier.

Timing is Crucial

Humor is about timing. I'm sure you've heard comedians say the same thing. There's a certain "rhythm" or "cadence" to humorous passages. With too many words, you bury the laugh; with too few words, your writing may lack the necessary tension or sense of anticipation that precedes a laugh. What's the formula for timing? Beats the heck out of me. My rule of thumb is this: if I can still laugh - or at least smile - at a gag two weeks after I wrote it, it's probably funny. But if the gag doesn't even make me *smile* two weeks later, I'll shorten the wordy passages that precede the punchline. That usually helps.

Don't Try so Hard

Don't try to be funny. Let your *characters* be funny. How? Get out of the way and let their personalities write through you. The minute you push a scene, trying to be humorous, trust me: you won't be.

Milk the Situation

Humor can be situational. Humor can also come through euphemism, hyperbole (ie, exaggeration), understatement, sarcasm, and misdirected dialogue. Having a "straight man" also helps. Remember: most people won't laugh out loud at written humor. Facial gestures and vocal inflection make up more than half of a stand-up comic's laughs. (Think of Red Skelton. Bill Cosby. Joan Rivers. Lily Tomlin. Phyllis Diller. The Monty Python crew, etc. They screwed up their faces, bumped their heads, pitched their voices to zany squeaks, etc.) Writers only have wit, words, and the words' rhythm on the page. If you can make the reader smile with such a handicap, you're doing a bang up job!

Examples of Humor

In the following excerpt from my romance novel, Texas Lover, situational humor is the key to the humor. Texas Ranger Wes Rawlins - who's as canny as a fox - goes undercover, pretending he can't read so he can cozy up to Rorie, the local schoolmarm. The book is set in 1885. [BTW: The character, Fancy, is Wes's sister-in-law. As an honorable man who loves his brother, Wes felt he had to leave home because of his infatuation with Fancy.]

"So tell me about this Dukker fellow," Wes said, changing the subject. "Is it true he asked you to marry him?"

Rorie started, having trouble hinging her jaw closed. How could he possibly have known...? Oh, yes. He'd spent the morning with Topher and

Merrilee.

"There's nothing to tell." She smiled ruefully. "Yes, he did, and I declined. Now why don't you turn to page - "

"How come?"

She arched a brow. "Because you'll never learn to read anything unless you open that book."

"I was asking why you turned Dukker down," he said with elaborate patience.

She suspected she would have been wiser to put Wes in his place the moment he'd dared broach the topic. Now she'd given credence to something she could have passed off simply as two young children's misunderstanding.

"As delightful as our conversation has been, Wes, we came here to read, remember?"

"Why don't you want to talk about Dukker?"

She squarely met the challenge in his gaze. "Why don't you want to talk about Fancy?"

For the tiniest fraction of time, his eyes widened.

"Hmmm. I reckon we might get started reading at that."

She smiled to herself. "Why don't you try reading a bit of the story to me?"

"You mean out loud?"

She nodded, hoping to soothe his performance jitters. "I'm sure you'll do fine. But if you come across a word you don't know, I'll be here to help you."

"Well...all right."

Opening the book, he shook out the pages, then squinted hard at the type. Rorie gently reached over and turned the book right-side-up in his hand.

"Oh, er, thank you, ma'am."

Next he crunched down in his chair, his chin all but touching his chest as he stared intently at the page. Great furrows of concentration lined his brow. A few moments passed before he cleared his throat.

"What's this one?" He pointed to the first word on the page. Rorie leaned across his arm, trying not to let the elusive scents of sandalwood soap and leather distract her from her mission of enlightenment.

"*The*," she said helpfully.

"The," he repeated in a grave voice.

More squinting ensued. He cocked his head to the right, and then to the left. "Ah..." He pointed again to the page and gazed piteously at her.

"Adventures," she said gently. "That's a rather difficult word. When they're difficult, we try to break them into syllables." She taught him how to divide "adventures" into segments.

"Now let's turn to Chapter One and try again."

"Chapter One? What's that?"

She was beginning to suspect she had agreed to a Herculean task. "Chapter One is the beginning of the story. You've been reading the title page."

"Oh," he said in mystified tones.

She glanced at him sharply. Was that the sparkle of merriment lurking in his eyes? Before she could decide, he'd averted his gaze and began thumbing through the volume.

"Let's see," he said in a voice that sounded a little too cheerful for her peace of mind. "Chapter One. I reckon that'd be about here." He grinned triumphantly.

He'd turned to Chapter Two.

She remembered her earlier thought, that he was too glib not to have had some exposure to education, and she found it a trifle doubtful that a man who could multiply numbers and recount history didn't have a clue how to find the beginning of a book.

"Wes," she began suspiciously, "do you know your alphabet?"

"Sure I do." He nodded vigorously for emphasis.

Rising, she pulled a slate and a piece of chalk from the shelf and handed them to him. "Why don't you show me?"

His face fell. "You mean now?"

The patience on which she had always prided herself began to wane. "Most certainly. Do you have a reason why you should wait?"

He fidgeted, reminding her of Topher when the boy had been caught in a lie. "Well, to tell the truth, ma'am, it would save us a heap of time if I just spelled out my name."

She arched a brow in question.

"It ain't quite as much trouble," he explained.

She cringed to hear his misuse of language, but she didn't correct him. After all, reading, spelling, and grammar were a bit much to tackle in one lesson.

"Very well. Spell out your name."

Looking eager to please, he balanced the bottom of the slate on his abdomen and, hunching over the board, began sketching in large, bold strokes. He stopped once or twice in mid-gesture, vigorously rubbing out a mistake with the elbow of his sleeve, before continuing with his task. At last he finished his masterpiece, and beaming, turned the board around for her inspection.

A giant "X" filled the slate from top to bottom.

It was all she could do not to snatch the board from his hands.

"That is *not* your name, Wes."

"It's not?"

He gazed at her in abject innocence, a state of being so completely unnatural to him, that she knew in an instant she'd been hoodwinked.

"Wesley Rawlins --" she began in her most formidable schoolmarm's voice.

"Wescott's my name."

She started, momentarily robbed of her indignation. "Wescott?"

He nodded with a grimace. "Mama was an angel, but she had the devil of a time naming boys. I got Wescott, Zack got Zachariah, and Cord..." he snickered, shaking his head. "Cord got Cordero. It means little lamb in Spanish."

She didn't know whether to believe this absurd tale or not. "Very well, Wescott Rawlins, are you humbugging me?"

"Oh no, ma'am. That's Cord's real name. Honest."

She began tapping her toe. "That is not what I meant and you know it. Can you, or can you not, read?"

"Well..." He cast her a sidelong glance. "I reckon I can."

"I knew it!"

Undaunted, he sidled closer. "You know, ma'am, reading is powerful hard work." His gaze trailed provocatively from her eyes to her lips. "Why don't we rest for a spell?"

In the following excerpt from Come Midnight by Suzanne Forster (Publisher: Berkley), misdirected dialogue creates the humor:

The rapid-fire questions Leigh posed confirmed that Nick Montera was thirty-seven, a California native, and that he'd never been married or even engaged. Leigh didn't find this too surprising, since Dawson had already told her Montera was raised in a East Los Angeles barrio and that he'd done time in prison as a young man. Still, she would have expected at least one serious relationship somewhere along the line.

"Sex?" she asked without thinking.

He let the question linger, hanging in the air between them until Leigh looked up. "Right here...?" he wanted to know.

She could feel a damp spot forming in the curve of her upper lip. "I think we can safely say you are male." She made a bold check in the M box.

SUSPENSE:

HOW TO WRITE A PAGE-TURNER

The more I pay attention to suspense, the more it fascinates me. Just the other day, I was listening to an Oldies radio station that was playing a western ballad called, *Ringo*. This song was narrated (as opposed to sung) by Lorne Green of *Bonanza* television fame (circa 1960s).

The ballad told of an outlaw who was shot and left for dead, then rescued by another man who nursed him back to health. By mid-song, the two men went their separate ways, the healer becoming a lawman, Ringo becoming the most villainous badman of the West. By the end of the song, the two meet for a shootout. Ringo is faster on the draw than our hero, but out of a sense of debt, he lets the lawman live - only to have the posse gun him down when he backs into the street. (Yes, the lawman feels bad about this foul play and hangs up his guns.)

Green's voice is a sensuous and evocative baritone, and the "galloping" rhythm of the music, along with the hushed choruses (each sung in a musical key higher than the one before it), had me gripping my steering wheel with white knuckles, waiting to "hear" what would happen next.

This, my friends, is the kind of mood you want to create in your novels.

Granted, you won't have Green's voice or a male choir and musical instruments to assist you. But there are techniques that can help you add suspense to your writing. These devices are well-used in mystery novels and movies (go rent some Alfred Hitchcock flicks to study further.)

Let Your Opening Chapter Drip with Evil

The reader is reading mysteries, after all, because she loves to be spooked. So don't waste page space talking about Aunt Esmeralda's new cat: unless, of course, the cat is really a vampire in disguise. You can make the reader start to worry early by revealing the evil in Chapter One. Show the reader how powerful and threatening this evil influence is. Many mystery writers use the device of setting a scene in the murderer's viewpoint. This clearly pits the strengths of the protagonist

against the antagonist, even if you carefully obscure the identity and gender of the antagonist. (A personal suggestion: if you're trying to obscure the killer's gender, you'll want to keep the scene fairly short. You'll find that writing prose without the use of "he/him" and "she/her" can get ponderous.)

Make Your Reader Care

Suspense builds because the reader has invested emotionally in the outcome - and suspects the outcome won't be good. Thus, you have to threaten your protagonist.

Throw in a Red Herring

A new clue - even if it's a false lead - should advance your plot and put your protagonist (or the person the protagonist is trying to protect) in more danger. Remember: let the characters write the book for you. Maybe one will reveal half way through your story that he lost a substantial amount of money in a poker game to the murder victim and thus becomes a prime suspect for murder.

Show the Details as Some Other Character Gets Axed

Eventually, you'll want to write a scene in which the protagonist is being threatened in the same devious way. This technique will make the reader shiver, because she already knows how dangerous the killer is.

Give Your Secondary Characters a Secret

(Or, in the case of a romance, give your hero or heroine a secret.) Since your protagonist has no clue which secrets are harmless, and which secrets are deadly, your reader is going to be screaming in her chair, "No, no, Penelope, don't open the door to the master's chamber...Argh!" Trust me. This happens. (I've heard readers do this on public transportation, and yes, even in my own bathroom. Eh-hem.)

Make the Protagonist Propel the Plot Forward

No, your protagonist can't sit around in his office, waiting for the phone to ring. He has to go out and face the evil that he fears (or that he intrepidly ignores). Each time he does, make sure you throw a dangerous or life-threatening obstacle in his way.

Play Up Misunderstandings

The forensics lab found nothing unusual about the broach, but the hero knows it conceals a trigger that tinges the pinhead with poison.

Sound a False Alarm

The idea here is to put the protagonist in a situation that gives him a near heart attack. Of course, his fears will be groundless - the sound was an “explosion” from a child’s video game, for instance. To be really wicked as an author and capitalize on the mischief you’ve created, you then must place your protagonist in the same situation - only this time, as he laughs off the incident, he comes face to face with the killer!

Give Your Protagonist a Deadline

Keep reminding the reader - and the protagonist - that the clock is ticking. If he doesn’t succeed by a certain time, guess what? Bye-bye, civilization-as-we-know-it! (Okay, okay. Maybe it’s just, “Bye-bye, protagonist.”)

Raise the Emotional Stakes

Every book has natural lulls. In a suspense, each lull must be followed by an emotional trigger. For instance, the protagonist thought that the only thing at stake was the new building for the orphans, now he finds out the philanthropist who withdrew the funding is being blackmailed. Is the philanthropist next on the killer’s list...or is the philanthropist the killer?

Add Spooky Dreams and Anecdotes

The idea here is to hint at sinister secrets. You don’t have to tell your reader everything up front, but do give her enough hints so that she knows that the memory or dream is a bad omen.

Trap Your Protagonist in a “Mental” Prison

Even though your protagonist (or the person your protagonist is trying to protect) knows he’s in danger if he remains, for instance, an employee of an evil law firm, the protagonist still doesn’t want to leave. A caution here: this character’s motivation has to be *solid*. Why doesn’t he call the police? The great suspense writers have come up with dozens of possibilities, here are a few: the protagonist

doesn't realize until too late that he's in danger (caution: be sure he doesn't look *stupid* here!); he's in love with Penelope and wants to help her beat that ridiculous murder rap; he must protect the coma victim (or the child witness, or the frightened waitress, etc.); the protagonist has personal reasons for getting involved in the first place (ie, he's trying to exonerate his junkie of a kid brother, who is the main murder suspect); the enemy has a warm-close-personal relationship with the law (maybe the enemy *is* the law!); the protagonist's reputation is in the toilet and no one will believe him, etc.

Foil the Rescue Attempt

No sooner does your hero reveal to the killer that the hero can tell the cops everything, the hero's cronies, whom he has relied upon to rescue him, screw up. Another great device: have the hero escape, arriving at a safe haven, only to realize too late that the haven isn't safe, or that the person who represents safety is involved in the murder cover-up.

Don't Forget: Read Heavily in Your Genre

Masters of suspense teach best through their writing, so pick up one of your favorite mysteries and study it, scene by scene. Dissect the writing techniques that you, as a reader, found particularly spine-tingling. If the technique worked on you, it's guaranteed to work on some other hapless victim...er, I mean, reader.

Happy hair-raising!

MARKETING YOUR NOVEL

Somebody will always tell you the publishing market is “tight” and that “nobody’s buying anything.” Don’t listen to them. Just pick up any copy of *Publisher’s Weekly* newspaper, and you’ll see that some new “unknown” has just landed a lucrative book contract. Or that certain themes are selling faster than the publishers can supply the demand (examples: angels books during the close of the 20th Century; post-mortem biographies on Princess Diana and Hispanic singer Selena.)

Even though the mid-list is shrinking (ie, publishers are investing more in celebrity books than in genre fiction), there is always somebody, somewhere in New York buying romance, science fiction/fantasy, mysteries, thrillers, and westerns. Why? Because these genres have a core readership that eagerly and consistently plunks down money for these novels. Publishers want to make money; therefore, they keep their hands in these markets.

About 50 percent of your success will come from talent, and 50 percent will be due to perseverance and luck.

I won’t tell you that getting published is easy. It isn’t. The faster you write, the more likely you are to make money in this business. The more willing you are to write “commercial books” (ie, to supply the market’s newest fad or cater to a publisher’s editorial whims), the brighter your financial outlook will be.

All dreams of glory and glamour aside, you must never forget that publishers are in this business to make money. They have no interest in gratifying your ego or preserving great literary masterworks (unless, of course, they stand to make a fortune reprinting, say, *Huckleberry Finn*.) You may point to some isolated incident and wail, “But J.K. Rowling’s first book became a mega bestseller and she didn’t do all the things you told me to do!” I’d have to say, you’re right. Some newbie authors do have extraordinary good luck.

(Her advance for her first Harry Potter book was \$100,000, an unheard of sum for the Young Adult / Children’s market at the time, but in this era of high-tech salaries, where

some software engineers are earning \$80 *per hour*, \$100,000 for 2 years worth of labor ain't big bucks, folks.)

I define “some newbies have good luck” as 1 out of every . . . oh, 2 million. These extremely fortunate individuals buck all the “normal” or “established” protocols for submitting manuscripts to publishers and still have resounding success.

Keep in mind, however, that 1 in 2 million isn't good odds. Each editor in a publishing house receives upwards of 250 manuscripts *per day*. Considering that most publishers only print 3 to 5 books *per month* in each genre category, you can see how staggering your competition is. (And keep in mind, something like 76 percent of all “sales” go to authors who've already been published.)

Keep in mind, too, that some of these people are only “one book wonders.” Just because your book lands on the New York Times bestseller's list doesn't guarantee that your next book will do the same. The odds for your success are undoubtedly better with the second book, but this is a highly subjective business. And publishers are known to do strange things: like merge with international, multi-media conglomerates that consider book publishing only marginally profitable and thus cut their book-buying budgets in half.

Should this keep you from pursuing your writing dream? Not in the least. But be wise to the way this business works. Do everything you can to hone your skills in preparation for your big break. And stay realistic in your financial goals (ie, don't quit your day job). I once read an IRS report comparing the salaries of various professions. Writers were listed as earning an “average” of 7 cents per hour.

▲ NOTE ABOUT THIS SECTION

My intention in this marketing section is to teach you how to prepare the two basic sales tools you will need to market your manuscript to a publisher. Because the business of marketing your manuscript - and then later, your published book - is so information-intensive, an entire book could be written on this subject. (Many books *have* been written on this subject. See the “Research” section in this manual for further reading.) This manual is too limited in scope for a lengthy discussion on the ins-and-outs of searching for agents, querying editors, and negotiating book contracts. While I do devote an entire class to these topics, it is only meant to get your feet wet.

Take the Initiative

If you are serious about becoming published, you will need to take the initiative:

- Research your market and stay abreast of its trends (so you know which editors are most likely to buy your manuscripts)
- Join writing groups (to network with other writers)
- Attend writing conferences (where you can pitch your book to editors and agents)
- Adopt a critique partner or join a critique group (for moral and professional support as you advance toward your goals)
- Enter your manuscript in writing contests that are judged by published authors and editors in your field; seek out those contests that specifically provide score sheets, encouraging judging to make comments (as opposed to arbitrary numerical values) so that you can receive “professional” feedback on your manuscript’s sales potential
- Continue to educate yourself about writing as a profession (ie, IRS requirements) and the general business of selling manuscripts and marketing books.

THE SUBMISSION PROCESS

Once you understand how to prepare a “Synopsis” and a “Query Letter,” the two sales tools that you need to market your manuscript, you will be ready to take the next step: submitting your book proposal to an agent and/or editor.

Keep in mind, however, that no editor will buy a partial manuscript from an unpublished author. (In this tight market, few editors are buying partial manuscripts from *published* authors.)

You must finish your manuscript before any editor will seriously consider making you an offer. The editor’s viewpoint goes something like this: “I don’t know you. You have no track record. I have no guarantee other than your word that you can actually deliver the kind of book you say you can. So why should I shell out several thousand dollars for the half-a-book you sent me when I’ve got 30+ finished manuscripts stacked here on my desk, all begging for a contract?”

The great irony of this business is that while editors and agents are both in the business of finding “the next New York Times bestseller,” no editor or agent wants you to pack up your manuscript and mail it to him.

In fact, they shudder when unpublished authors do this. You must be *invited* to send your manuscript to an editor or agent. It’s a general rule of thumb that all publishers want to be queried first. The language that indicates this can be found in their guidelines, which state something like, “We do not accept unsolicited manuscripts.”

A protocol for manuscript submissions has developed in the publishing industry, and if you want to increase your odds of selling (and maintaining a congenial relationship with your intended editor/agent), you’ll follow this protocol.

The First Step: Querying an Agent or Editor

I cannot emphasize the following enough: do your research! If you are looking for an editor or agent, be sure you submit your letter of inquiry (commonly called “the query letter”) to the right person.

The reality is this: editors and agents are overwhelmed by mail. They don’t have time to forward your misaddressed letter to the “correct” mailbox. If you send your, say, military sci-fic novel to an editor who is only looking for dark fantasy, you’ve just wasted time and postage. Your rejection letter -- if you’re lucky enough to get any correspondence at all -- will read something like this, “Dear Author: we appreciate the opportunity to review your manuscript, but it doesn’t meet our needs at this time. Good luck placing it somewhere else.”

You may think from this letter that your manuscript isn’t commercial; in actuality, nobody read your proposal.

How do you know your letter was actually read? One of two things will happen. You’ll receive a letter that invites you to submit your book proposal for further consideration. (Note: Your book proposal consists of your first three chapters and a synopsis.)

The second scenario: you will receive a rejection letter. (See section on Rejection letters)

When Do I Query an Agent?

- When you have a completed manuscript to sell
- When you want somebody to help you open publishing doors and negotiate better book contracts
- When you’ve met an agent at a conference who invites you to send him/her a query letter (or a proposal, for that matter)
- When your dream publisher’s guidelines say, “We do not accept unagented manuscripts.”

Again, do your research! Make sure you are querying an agent who represents the kind of books you want to write. Also, be sure this agent is taking on new clients. (Many aren’t.) There are many good reasons for hiring an agent to market your

book. The only time I would not necessarily recommend an agent is if you want to write for Harlequin and Silhouette romance. Even the best agents can't get these publishing monopolies to budge on their standard contracts. Paying 15% to an agent to negotiate a Harlequin/Silhouette contract is like throwing away money; however, I do know many Harlequin/Silhouette authors who swear that their agents were able to get them a little more money, even if these agents were not able to negotiate contractual concessions.

For the rest of you, I suggest that you seriously consider hiring an agent. Not only will an editor pay more attention to your work, you'll have a better chance of increasing your take-home pay. Agents have more publishing contacts, more inside information, and more negotiating savvy than you do. They know what the current fair market price is for the type of book you're writing. They know which publishers are planning to acquire more books for new product lines -- and which are planning to eliminate product lines. An agent allows you to play the good cop with your editor (so you maintain a friendly working relationship with her throughout the writing process) while your agent plays the bad cop, negotiating the terms of your contract.

The good news about agents is that if you have one, an editor will read your work more quickly.

In other words, she believes that since some reputable professional represents you, you might have potential. The bad news about agents is that they are often tougher to get than an editor. Sometimes you'll get an offer for a book contract (from an editor) before an agent agrees to represent you. At this point, it's a good idea to call the agent you've been soliciting and let him/her know you have an offer. While the agent might not take you on as a full-time client, he/she will probably agree to help you negotiate a better contract.

By the way, if you have an agent, it is not necessary to query an editor. That is the agent's job. Now that you have this employee (because you are, in effect, hiring an agent, agreeing that she gets 15 percent off the top of everything you earn), you ask her professional advice on how best to market your book, submit your ideas, and come up with a verbal (or written) agreement. Most agents feel they know best, but since they are your employees, you can tell them if you don't like their approach or would prefer them to represent you to one editor before another.

Your agent's job is also to keep you informed of all correspondence she sends out on your behalf, and to send you copies of all correspondence she receives about your book. If you have any questions regarding the status of your proposal, you call your agent. You do not under any circumstances contact an editor who has not

yet signed you to a contract. To contact an editor “behind your agent’s back” is considered unprofessional behavior and may give your agent grounds to stop representing you.

How Do I Find An Agent?

To begin, check out the *Writer’s Guide to Literary Agents* (available at some libraries and most bookstores). Ask other writers about the agent who represents them and what their experiences have been with that agent, good and bad. Someone once told me you never know how good an agent is until they negotiate your first book contract. Everything else is hearsay.

To be sure the agent is reputable, do your research. Consult national writing organizations, such as Novelist’s Inc., Romance Writers of America, Mystery Writers of America, etc., to see if any complaints have been filed against the individual you are considering.

You can also check to see if this individual is a member of the Association of Author Representatives (AAR). If she is, then she has agreed to certain standards and professional ethics. This includes the agreement not to charge a reading fee (however, it is acceptable to charge an office fee to pay for expenses incurred prior to your first sale). Membership in AAR also implies that the agent agrees to charge a standard “agenting fee” of 15 percent, which means your agent earns 15 percent of all monies you earn during the life of each book she sells for you. (For the negotiation of movie rights, the fee may be 20 percent.)

I also recommend writing to AAR for a copy of its “*Questions to Ask Literary Agents.*” This document is invaluable for helping you determine whether or not to hire a particular agent.

Sources for Agents:

- Association of Authors’ Representatives (AAR)
Ten Astor Place, New York, NY 10003. To receive a membership list, include SASE (#10 envelope with 55 cent postage) and a check or money order payable to AAR in the amount of \$7 US to defray shipping/handling costs.
- *Literary Market Place*, an annual directory

- *Insider's Guide to Book Editors, Publishers, and Literary Agents* by Jeff Herman
- *Guide to Literary Agents & Art/Photo Reps*, Writer's Digest Books
- *Publisher's Weekly* (newspaper)

When Do I Query an Editor?

- When you have a completed manuscript to sell
- When you've met an editor at a conference who invites you to send him/her your proposal
- While you're waiting for an agent to show interest in you

If you're looking for an editor, be sure you submit your query letter to a person, not a "title". In other words, find out the name of the editor who is acquiring the kinds of manuscripts you want to sell, and send your letter of inquiry to him/her. Check to see if your editor will accept a query letter via email. NEVER attach your chapters and synopsis unless she asks you to send them to her.

Once you receive this coveted invitation, determine how she would like to receive the proposal: as an email attachment or as a hard copy via snail mail.

If you are invited to send an email attachment, you will probably have to send it as a compressed Microsoft Word file. If you do not already compose your manuscript into Microsoft Word, I highly recommend that you bite the bullet and purchase it. Microsoft Word is the standard in the industry. Learn how to use it.

How Do I Find an Editor?

Visit publisher's websites. Look for their "guidelines" or "publishing tips" section. You might also consult with the most recent version of the *Writer's Market* (available at any library and at most bookstores) for information about publishing houses. However, keep in mind this information gets outdated quickly - sometimes before it's printed. To verify that a particular editor is still working at a publishing house or that she is accepting your type

of manuscript, call the receptionist at that publishing house or visit the website.

Other ways to find an editor: Read writer's magazines; become active on email loops where marketing information is shared; attend conferences where New York editors are scheduled to speak (and where they are accepting appointments with new writers); call up the publishing house and ask the receptionist to whom you should address a query letter for a "cozy" or an "historical romance" or an "adult western." In short, there are a number of ways to get this information. It's not a secret.

The Second Step: Responding to an Invitation to Submit a Book Proposal

At this point, you've piqued the editor's or agent's interest. Now you need to keep that interest! Waste no time mailing her the proposal she requested. (Yes, it will probably sit on her desk for 6 weeks to 6 months before she gets around to looking at it. This only underscores how important it is to get your materials to her fast, before her enthusiasm for your story wears off.)

Once you receive the coveted invitation to send your proposal, determine how the agent or editor would like to receive the documents: as an email attachment or as a hard copy via snail mail.

If you are invited to send an email attachment, you will probably have to send it as a compressed Microsoft Word file. (If you do not already compose your manuscript in Microsoft Word, I highly recommend that you bite the bullet and purchase it. Microsoft Word is the standard in the industry. Learn how to use it.)

If you are instructed to send a hard copy via snail mail, be sure your print out a copy that has dark, easily read print. (That does not mean that you "bold" your entire manuscript! That means you change your printer's toner!)

Whenever you submit a hard copy of your proposal to an agent or an editor, and you would like that material returned to you, you must include an SASE (self-addressed, stamped envelope). Otherwise, don't expect to see your chapters again.

Include the Following with Your Book Proposal:

- Cover Letter (an abbreviated version of your Query Letter, reminding editor

that she asked to see your proposal. Supply the title of your book, its length, and the genre.)

- Synopsis
- Chapters 1, 2, & 3 (and your prologue, if you have one)
- Cover Page for the “Chapters” Section of Your Proposal (list your name and contact info, the title of the book, its approximate length, and the genre)
- SASE (if you are sending the proposal via snail mail)
- Optional: return postcard (for snail mail). This post card should also be self-addressed and stamped. In your cover letter, ask that the editor fill out the postcard and mail it back to you as soon as she opens your proposal. To get her attention, attach the postcard to the top of your cover letter, so that the postcard is the first thing she sees.

The return post card is an inexpensive method for guaranteeing that your proposal arrived and when you might receive a response. On the front, address the postcard to yourself. On the back, write out the following:

“I _____ (editor’s name) received your manuscript,
_____ (title) on _____ (date). You can
expect a response from me in _____ weeks.”

Once you receive that post card, you know how long to wait before you can expect a reply. After that date (you might want to give her a week longer), write another polite letter, inquiring about the status of your proposal. If your second letter is ignored, and the wait really gets out of hand, call her assistant to inquire about your manuscript’s status. In this day of email overkill, I suggest refraining from email harassment, unless she has specifically invited you to contact her by email.

MANUSCRIPT FORMAT: FOLLOW THESE GUIDELINES

- 1-inch margins on all sides
- Indent every paragraph. The standard is 5 spaces.
- Double space between every line on the page
- Do NOT double space (in this case, quadruple space) between paragraphs!
- The following header should appear on every page:
 - Top Left, in caps: BOOK TITLE
 - Top Right: Your Name/page #
 - If this is a Synopsis, beneath BOOK TITLE, type “Synopsis”
- 12-inch Courier font (or some other “non-proportional” font. Avoid Arial and Times Roman; these are “proportional” fonts)
- If you are starting a new chapter:
 - After your header, space to the 2/3rd’s point on your page
 - Center your cursor and type in caps: CHAPTER ONE
 - Hit the “enter” key once (ie, one “double space”)
 - Align your cursor with the left margin, indent the first paragraph, and begin typing your text
- Never, ever bind your manuscript!
Always mail it loosely bound in a box or a bubble/padded envelope. (At the proposal stage, however, it is acceptable to paperclip a Synopsis to keep it separate from your three chapters, and to use a “binder clip” to hold your first three chapters together. DO NOT staple any of these items together at any stage.)

Important Formatting tip #1:

Publisher’s have an archaic way of calculating the number of words per page, and you must accommodate them. (We’ll talk more about this in class.) Suffice it to say, that your pages should contain approximately 25 lines of type, with approximately 10 words per line, so that your word count approximates 250 per page. This is a hard-and-fast rule. Don’t irritate a would-be editor by giving her teeny type, narrow margins, or too many lines of text per page. Editors have to

read a lot in their business, and their eyes grow fatigued. If your manuscript is crammed full of words (ie, uninviting to read because it lacks “white space”) guess what? You’ve wasted your time and money, because she won’t even crack it open.

Important Formatting tip #2:

You’d think this goes without saying, but based on what I’ve seen, some folks need to be reminded. Make sure your manuscript is free of grammatical errors and typos! And please, folks, replace your printer’s ink cartridge. Don’t expect anyone in this business to read pages that are smeared or faded.

REJECTION LETTERS: READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Rejection letters don't have to be bad things. If your proposal had merit and showcased your potential as a writer, the letter will usually address the reasons your book was turned down. This is a kudo, not a kick in the teeth, and you should be very grateful to any editor who takes the time to offer fine-tuning suggestions for your manuscript.

Here are two examples of rejection letters that I received for my first completed manuscript, a Civil War romance:

Dear Adrienne:

Thank you so much for the chance to see *Echoes of the Heart*. I really enjoyed the combination of romance and action; however, there seemed to be so many characters and conspiracies that I'd have to search back to find who was who and what their motives were.

The book was well-written and many of the supporting characters were strong - especially Briggs - but I never got a good sense of the struggle between Taryn's love for Grey and her anger with him. I found this more detracting than endearing. For these reasons, I've decided to pass. Again, thanks for the look and for thinking of Berkley.

Dear Adrienne:

(Your) proposal was wonderfully well-written. But I had a few problems with the romantic tension that are significant enough to prevent me from taking this further. While I thought Grey and Taryn were terrific characters, I felt that much of the tension between them evolved from the disparity between Northerners and Southerners. This just didn't seem unique or compelling enough for me. Also, many of the other conflicts seemed to rely heavily on a lack of communication between the characters (ie, the trust issues and their mutual suspicions.) I would like to see more

inner turmoil, more multi-layered and complex dilemmas. (You) are a talented writer, and I would be honored to consider any other projects you may have. I'm afraid *Echoes of the Heart* just isn't for me.

(Signed by an editor at NAL/Dutton Publishers, now part of the Penguin/Berkley Publishing Group)

If you analyze these letters, you can see that both editors felt my characters lacked believable (emotional) conflict, particularly the oh-so-important internal conflict. As I suggested earlier in this manual, external conflict is never enough to carry a story.

Both editors also alluded to the fact that the book was heavily laden with complicated subplots and that these subplots detracted from the main storyline. (In other words, I failed to stick to the romance.)

Although I was not able to sell this manuscript (revising it was a nightmare, and I finally decided it would be easier to write something new), I took their words to heart. I recognized that I needed to brush up on my characterization skills if I was ever going to sell a book.

Editors can be supportive and encouraging.

The editors that read my manuscript took time to give me professional advice about the strengths and weaknesses of my proposal. In fact, they were highly complimentary of my writing style (a nice consolation when your book is rejected.)

When you reach the point where you are receiving letters of this caliber -- letters that contain similar criticisms -- seriously consider making the changes the editors suggest. It's their way of saying, "You're so close! Just work a little harder at your craft," or "You show a lot of talent as a writer. But you still haven't grasped what the readers want in this genre."

By the way, both of these editors have become "senior editors" and are now working for new publishing houses. This can be a good thing, or a bad thing, depending on your viewpoint. The publishing business is incestuous. Understand that to advance their careers, editors often jump from house to house.

Editors have long memories. They remember the writers who keep ignoring their advice, submitting manuscript after manuscript without demonstrating any professional growth. If your "personal" rejection letters degenerate to "generic" rejection letters, you can be assured that the editor has stopped reading your material. Why should she? You've proven yourself stubborn and unwilling to accept editorial advice - another mark of unprofessionalism.

WRITING THE QUERY LETTER

The Query Letter is the toughest piece of prose you'll ever write. Why? You have to sell your novel idea, yourself, and your skills level in *no more than two pages*. This page length is a hard-and-fast rule. Write succinctly; do not try to cram more words onto the page by reducing your point size below 11 or by narrowing your margins below a half inch. If you can't sell yourself and your book in two pages, you may need to take a course on how to tighten your writing.

In the meantime, your query letter is your letter of inquiry, or your letter of introduction. Its purpose is to get an agent or editor to *request your manuscript proposal*. So be sure to include in your last paragraph pharaseology such as, "I would like to submit a more detailed proposal of my book for your consideration. Please contact me at your earliest convenience."

The way you get an agent/editor to request your manuscript proposal is to convince her you have a good idea and you can turn it into a publishable novel.

ELEMENTS OF A GOOD QUERY LETTER

- Lead: 1-2 paragraphs introducing your idea. It may be a brief anecdote or provocative quote, startling statistics or a straight statement. Also in this paragraph, you'll want to indicate the title of your manuscript, its "finished length" (ie, "word count"), the genre it falls into (be specific, ie, "Regency Romance" or "Hard-boiled Mystery," etc.) and where the novel is set geographically and historically.
- The next 3 to 4 paragraphs of your query letter are devoted to capsulizing your novel. (Now you can see why this is so tough: you get about 200 words to describe all the excitement of a 100,000 word novel!)

- The next paragraph should indicate why you are qualified to write this book. For instance, you might indicate that you've based your "forensic sleuth" on your father, who has worked as a forensic doctor for 30 years. Or that you have won a fiction writing contest. Or that you've extensively researched the subject matter. Or that you've been active for X-years in a particular writers' organization, etc.
- Your final paragraph should indicate that the manuscript is complete (they won't be interested if it isn't.) If it is *not* complete, be absolutely clear that you will have it finished in six weeks (ie, the least amount of time in which you can expect a response.) Also note that you have included your SASE for their "convenient reply". And, as mentioned earlier, conclude the letter with a statement such as, "Thank you for considering my novel, XYZ Title. I would like to submit a more detailed proposal for your consideration. Please contact me at your earliest convenience using the SASE that I've enclosed."

TIPS FOR AN EYE-CATCHING QUERY LETTER

- Do your research! Address your letter to the appropriate real person (not the generic title, "editor") who is actively acquiring novels in your genre. The same goes for the agent query.
- Also in the research category, be sure you know the word-count limitations of your genre. If you are proposing a 150,000-word book to an editor who only buys 50,000-word books, you've wasted your time and hers.
- Forget all the stuff you learned about writing "formal" business letters. This letter is a sales tool. As a result, it should reflect the style of your fiction writing (ie, don't write like a college professor, a lawyer, or a medical doctor.)
- The tone of your letter, overall, should be a bit "breezy". Humor is always a good selling point.
- If you must discuss technical elements (ie, your plot is about a new stealth jet), avoid jargon that might confuse a lay person.
- Be sure to cover the full novel in your capsulization. Do not leave the editor guessing about the ending of your book!
- Do your best to highlight significant goals, motivations, and conflicts for the protagonist(s) and antagonist. This "characterization" information is as important

(perhaps more important) than your plot.

- When discussing your personal accomplishments, keep them in line with your professional writing career. The editor won't care that you won the Miss Teen USA Pageant for Waddle, PA, unless your protagonist, for instance, is an amateur sleuth who is investigating the poisoning of a fellow beauty contestant.
- Do not, under any circumstances, gush or sensationalize. (Example: "This is the next bestseller on jungle fungi, and you'll be lucky to get the first bid on it!") Let your writing speak for itself.
- Do not, under any circumstances, start to instruct the agent/editor how to do her job (ie, "I want Tom Cruise as my cover model, and please contact Tom Clancy to give me his endorsement.") At this point in your career, you don't have a leg to stand on and you will only irritate her.
- If you have a published author friend who has been kind enough to let you use her as an endorsement when contacting her own editor or agent, by all means, get that information in the opening line of your letter. (Example, "Jenny Sawyer, who writes for you under the pseudonym Angel Bliss, has read my 100,000 word novel, *Passion's Promise*, and recommended that I contact you, since you are actively acquiring contemporary romances set in rustic treehouses overlooking the Amazon River.") However, be forewarned: the endorsement tactic will get the editor to read your letter. It will not necessarily earn you an invitation to submit your book proposal. Your fiction-writing is the deciding factor.
- If you are lucky enough to have met the agent/editor in person, and she has requested that you mail her a proposal, by all means, skip the query letter phase and send her your proposal! Do, however, include a one-page cover letter, reiterating in the first line where you met and that she did indeed request the proposal; in the following paragraphs, highlight everything else that a query letter would normally discuss *except* for your storyline. That, obviously, will be covered in detail in the synopsis you've enclosed.
- Spell-check everything. Then have somebody else who is wise in the ways of spelling and grammar proofread the proposal for you. Typos and grammatical errors will get you rejected out-of-hand.

EXAMPLE OF A SELLING QUERY LETTER

Ms. Shirley Lovejoy
Senior Editor, Avon Romance
c/o HarperCollins Publishers
10 East 53rd Street
New York NY 10022-5299

RE: SCOUNDREL FOR HIRE, an American Historical Romance
Completed at 100,000 words

Dear Ms. Lovejoy:

According to a recent poll by *Romantic Times Magazine*, romance novels set in the American West rank as a perennial favorite among avid readers. Thus, I would like to submit for your consideration my western romance, *SCOUNDREL FOR HIRE*, which is set in Aspen, Colorado, during its silver-mining heyday (1885). I believe this book has all the humor, sensuality, and historical flavor that readers have come to expect from the Avon Romance line - and a cast of quirky, heart-warming characters that are indelibly my own.

In *Scoundrel for Hire*, the heroine, Silver Nichols, is desperate to save her millionaire Papa from the clutches of nefarious "Madam" Celestia, a social-climbing golddigger who purports to be a fortune-teller. But happy-go-lucky Papa refuses to be disturbed by the "impropriety" of such a fiancée, and with less than six weeks before the wedding, Silver is at her wits' end. Thus enters our hero, rascal extraordinaire, Raphael "Rafe" Jones. Silver hires the con-man to pose as a British duke because she hopes that the lure of a younger, titled beau will expose Celestia's true colors and finally convince Papa that Celestia loves his money, not him.

But Papa complicate matters when he decides the "Duke of Chumley" is the son he always wished he'd had. Recognizing Silver's secret infatuation with Rafe, Papa offers him a partnership in his mine if Rafe will "distract Silver" with a little marriage-minded wooing. Thus, the real fun begins in this story: Silver is bamboozling Papa, Papa is bamboozling Silver; and Rafe is bamboozling them both. Celestia, ironically, is the only character in the book who isn't engaged in a humbug. Additional humor is provided by Rafe's pet otter, which he smuggles into Silver's mansion (and which escapes, causing a ruckus at Celestia's seance), and by a snooty British butler who recognizes Rafe as an imposter and does his best to "prove" Rafe's plebeian bloodline to Silver.

Using her crystal ball, Celestia predicts that Rafe and Silver will work out their differences and be married - much to Silver's derision. But Silver is secretly falling in love with Rafe. She learns that he was "hoodwinked" by foster parents, and the pain of that betrayal led

him to his shady lifestyle. This understanding makes her reconsider her plot to prevent her father's marriage. As for Rafe, he comes to see that Silver isn't really a money-hungry barracuda and that she does truly have her father's happiness at heart. As a result, he yearns to become an "honorable" man who is worthy of her love. But before Rafe can make good on his plan, outlaws kidnap him, thinking to extort a ransom for the "Duke of Chumley." They tie up Rafe in Papa's mine. Horrified to realize that her selfish plot has endangered Rafe's life, Silver must use her ingenuity to outwit the kidnappers, while Rafe must overcome a severe beating to rescue her from a cave-in that results from the outlaws' gunfire. Thanks to Celestia's crystal ball, the lovers are discovered by Papa as they battle their way to the surface.

Reunited with Papa and Celestia, Silver must confess that Rafe is the man she loves - but he isn't really a duke. Papa is nevertheless delighted and calls for a double wedding. As the book closes following Silver's and Rafe's celebratory love-making, Silver admits wistfully that there might be some truth to Celestia's fortune-telling, after all.

Scoundrel for Hire is my sixth completed manuscript. It was a finalist in the Golden Heart Competition sponsored by Romance Writers of America. That award marked my 33rd writing recognition. As a marketing professional, I have demonstrated a successful, award-winning track record as well, and I plan to use my expertise to promote my books. As a former journalist, my byline has appeared in national publications and on the Associated Press wire service. You might also be interested to know that I currently serve as the Vice President of Publicity for the West Houston Chapter of RWA, and that I have spoken at three of the last five national RWA conferences on topics ranging from characterization to synopses.

Scoundrel for Hire is complete at 100,000 words, and I would like to submit a more detailed proposal for your consideration. Please contact me at your earliest convenience, using the enclosed SASE.

Sincerely,
Adrienne deWolfe

THE SELLING SYNOPSIS

A synopsis, by definition, is a narrative summary of your *entire novel*, covering the prologue (if you have one) to the final page. While the query letter will be the hardest piece of prose you've ever written, the synopsis will rank a darn close second. The reasons are varied, and differ from author to author. But in most cases, the most difficult thing for new writers is to understand how to summarize a lengthy piece of prose in less than 15 pages, while highlighting the points of the story that are the most significant and the characters that are the most significant.

A publisher will sometimes specify a length for your synopsis. Depending on the publisher, this could range from 4 to 15 pages. Agents are notorious for demanding shorter pieces (1 to 4 pages). The reason is that they are looking for "sound bytes" so to speak - catchy phrases and unique ideas - that they can pitch over the phone to an editor in 2 minutes or less.

Longer synopses have pitfalls. Beware!

Now, it may occur to you that editors who allow you to write lengthier synopses are really your friends. This is not necessarily so. I've seen many authors -- published ones, included -- hang themselves because they have too many words to play with. They get bogged down in discussing more information than the editor needs to know, and as a result, they raise editorial questions. For instance, one of my published writer friends was having so much trouble selling her books with an 8-page synopsis, that her editor encouraged her to write 15 pages.

At this point my friend started mentioning one-liner plot points that she thought would be "unique," that would show the depth of her heroine's character, and that would enhance the chances of selling the novel (Ex: the heroine was an award-winning quilter who champions the cause of the national A.I.D.S. quilt and the right to a public education for children with A.I.D.S.)

Well, this particular editor had an aversion to sad/controversial subplots in romance stories, particularly in which young characters might die. She had so many questions

about why this heroine chose this “hobby” that the editor rejected my friend’s manuscript. The irony? This “hobby” was a minor piece of background information that only got mentioned twice in the completed 275-page book.

No published writer whom I know loves to write synopses, so if you find the process difficult, you’re not alone. Writing the synopsis for a completed manuscript is a thousand times easier than writing a synopsis for a partial manuscript (this is why I encourage you to finish the manuscript before tackling the synopsis.) If your manuscript isn’t complete, you don’t know precisely how the story will turn out and, in the process of writing the book, you may realize the plot just won’t “work” the way you envisioned it in the synopsis.

Fortunately, you don’t have to worry about that yet, because as an unpublished author, you won’t be submitting a proposal for an unfinished manuscript, right?

The good news is, once you have an editor who wants you to write a second book on proposal, she will be a bit more lenient about your storyline, as suggested in your synopsis. Most editors understand that the process of writing takes twists and turns, and that the exact details as outlined in the synopsis may change. However, be sure that your main storyline runs a similar course -- and ends a similar way -- as described in the synopsis. If it doesn’t, you’ll need to call your editor and discuss the story changes you propose.

SYNOPSIS TECHNICALITIES

Double-space your pages: do not, however, double space between paragraphs. Also: do not divide synopses into chapters. Simply write the story from Chapter One to the End in free-flowing prose.

Write in present tense: Why? I have no idea. It’s a hard-and-fast rule, though. Perhaps the present tense helps editors separate the synopsis from the Chapters it will accompany.

Choose strong verbs and specific nouns: Since you’ve got less space, you really need to exercise “power writing” to stick to the page restrictions.

Use the omniscient viewpoint: Not only will the omniscient viewpoint help you stay brief (ie, you don’t have to waste page space on transitioning between each character’s viewpoint), it will contribute consistency to this short document.

Tell, don't show: “Showing” (or painting a sensory picture) requires lots of details, which are usually conveyed through adjectives and adverbs; “telling” (or summarizing the highlights) requires you to eliminate most of the adjectives and adverbs. Thus, to “tell” in a synopsis allows you to condense your writing.

Tone/style of the writing: Keep it consistent with the category novel you are writing.

Average length: Unless otherwise specified by a publishing house or agent, the length of your synopsis should be proportional to your story. A rule of thumb: 1 synopsis page = 25 to 50 manuscript pages (depending on the length of your novel.)

TWO TYPES OF SYNOPSES

Two basic kinds of synopses exist, and each has its pros and cons. For a beginner, I recommend the “Functional” Synopsis, which is formulaic. Because each paragraph is dedicated to a specific topic, the Functional Synopsis is easier to tackle.

Your other option, the “Narrative” Synopsis, is a free-form summary; thus, anything goes. The drawback here is you may discover you’ve run out of page space long before you finish the story. (The *Texas Outlaw* synopsis in the Appendix is written in “Narrative” format. You’ll see that it has two weaknesses: its lack of characterization for the hero and a limited number of subplots.)

Functional Synopsis

Despite its formulaic presentation, the Functional Synopsis still needs to be written in a story-format, in otherwise, like a short version of your novel.

Paragraph 1: Open with a narrative hook, no more than two sentences in length.

Paragraph 2: Discuss your setting (time period and location) and how this impacts the story. This paragraph will also be brief; I recommend no more than 3 sentences, since the meat of your story has yet to be discussed.

Paragraph 3: Protagonist (or heroine): discuss her overall story goal, motivation, and inner and outer conflicts. This external conflict should transition nicely into the Antagonist (or the hero, if you’re writing a romance.)

Paragraph 4: Antagonist (or hero): discuss his overall story goal, motivation, and inner and outer conflicts. This external conflict should transition nicely into the first pivotal scene, in which the Protagonist and Antagonist are pitted against each other.

Paragraphs 5 to End (with the exception of the Final Paragraph): Linear Plot. In these paragraphs, you discuss the 5 to 7 pivotal scenes you’ve selected on which to hang your story line. Be sure that each scene ups the emotional/story conflict in

the story. Also, be sure that in each scene, you clearly discuss the protagonist's/antagonist's goal, motivation, and conflict, and the decision that results from the "disaster" that happens at the end of each scene. Also be sure that your "climax" or "black moment" is clearly discussed, usually in the second to last paragraph.

In the meantime, you need to address the secondary characters and subplots. You have two options: one is to weave them into the storyline starting with paragraph five, as you would weave them into the storyline of a narrative synopsis (personally, I prefer this method). The second option is to devote one entire paragraph to the most significant secondary characters and the subplots they represent.

Final Paragraph: Resolution. Be sure you clearly tie up all plot points. Show that the murder is solved, the romance is headed for marriage, the aliens lose the war, etc. Do not, under any circumstances, leave the editor guessing about your ending. Tell her what it is in plain English.

The Narrative Synopsis

As its name implies, this method is a narrative summary of your story. Do not waste story space on dialogue, descriptions of the environment, or the physical characteristics of your protagonist/antagonist (unless, of course, this information is vital to moving your plot forward).

When writing a Narrative Synopsis:

- Always begin with a narrative hook: it draws the reader immediately into your story.
- Always begin with the events of Chapter 1 and continue to the End.
- Within the narration, you will need to cover the 5 W's: Who, What, Where, When, Why

Who/What: Delineate Main Characters, their full names, occupations, ages if necessary to the story, and their main goals, motivations, and conflicts. Eventually, as discussed earlier, you will weave in the secondary characters, limiting their discussion to their relationship to the main characters and how the secondary characters affect the main characters as they strive for their goals.

Where/When: Establish geographic/historical setting.

Why: Set-up conflicts

- a. Focus on pivotal plot scenes. Remember: a series of episodes does not make a plot; conflict does.
- b. “Struggle” is essence of external conflict (or plot); show how the action is driven by your characters’ goals, motivations, and inner conflicts.

Subplots: These are the mini stories related to your main plot. As discussed above, cover only what is necessary to show how the protagonist/antagonist is being kept from achieving his main story goal.

- Near the end of your synopsis, you must clearly delineate the climax, crisis, or black moment at which point the protagonist’s goal appears hopeless.
- The final paragraph of your synopsis will be devoted to tying up loose ends and discussing the resolution of your story.

SYNOPSIS PITFALLS

In reading the synopses of published and unpublished authors, the greatest pitfall has to do with the judicious selection of characters and pivotal scenes. I suggest writing the synopsis as if your story contains only the two primary characters: the protagonist (or in the case of a romance, the hero and heroine) and the antagonist. Select only five to seven pivotal (ie, major or cataclysmic) scenes to discuss, plus the dark moment and the resolution of the novel.

Secondary characters will be reduced in number and significance.

Include only those secondaries who affect the protagonist's/antagonist's goals in each of the pivotal scenes. In other words, most of your secondary characters will never be mentioned in your synopsis. For example, in my first novel, *Texas Outlaw*, (see Appendix for a copy of the synopsis that sold the book), there are approximately 40 characters. However, if you read the synopsis, you'll see that I mention only four, and two of them are the hero and heroine.

By the way: you must keep in mind that the editor (who will be scanning your synopsis) will be unable to remember the name of multiple secondary characters. This is why you must "tag" secondary characters if long passages of narrative occur before you mention them again. Example: the first time you mention the outlaw leader, you might write, "Red Willy, the leader of the Overland Gang, blames Luke for putting him in prison."

In the second reference, more than a page later, you might write, "The outlaw leader rallies his gang. Red Willy tells them it's time to have their revenge."

When selecting the seven pivotal scenes on which you wish to hang your storyline, you must take special care to show logically, and sequentially, how each scene generates the next scene, *no matter how many other scenes fall between these two pivotal scenes in your novel.*

For example, if paragraph one of your synopsis talks about a bank robbery in Chapter One, and paragraph two of your synopsis talks about the love scene in Chapter Six, you must show the editor how the bank robbery led up to/precipitated/caused the love scene, even though, in reality, 100 pages worth of other stuff happened. If you don't clearly link these two scenes, your synopsis will be choppy and confusing. And when you confuse your editor, you've lost your sale.

Characters are the heart of your story! And yet, in the struggle to summarize the storyline in 15 pages or less, new writers often exclude the characters' goals, motivations, and conflicts. This lapse will get you rejected faster than you can blink.

New writers often fall into a third synopsis-writing pitfall: concentrating on external conflict (ie, plot) and not giving enough attention to internal conflict (ie, the goals, motivations and obstacles that each major character faces while striving for its goals.) Your synopsis absolutely must discuss (in brief) what motivates your character in each of the pivotal scenes you choose to discuss. You must also clearly delineate what the character wants, what's in his way, and what decision he makes that leads to the next pivotal scene.

However, this information must be revealed in story form. In other words, do not write, "In the shootout scene, Luke's obstacle is to free himself so he can achieve his scene goal, to save Sally Lu, who represents his obstacle by believing he's a ghost." Instead, you'd write, "As the shootout escalates, Luke breaks free of the stakes that tied him to the wagon wheel and leaps through the bedroom window to rescue Sally Lu. But Sally Lu, hysterical from lack of sleep and other abuses, believes Luke is a ghost. She hits him with a bedpan and flees into the street, where Red Willy grabs her, making her his body shield."

Additional Tips for Writing Your Synopsis

- Keep your main theme (ie, romance, mystery, etc.) the prominent theme of your synopsis. Limit yourself to the scenes in which there is a major turning-point in the ROMANCE or the MYSTERY or the QUEST etc.
- Eliminate most details (Example of too much: "He walked in, sat down in the corner booth, and knew instantly her smile would change his life." A better way: "He knew instantly she would change his life.") Beware of including too many details of back story, too. (Example: Is it really important to know she was raised in Texas when the book takes place in New Orleans? Provide broad brush strokes of background ONLY as it affects the inner conflicts and/or character motivations.)
- Choose to include only those secondary characters who present obstacles and/or complications to the romance/mystery/quest, etc. Leave out all other secondary characters.
- Every paragraph of plot in your synopsis will roughly equal one chapter in your book. If you've spent a full page on one scene, you've included too much detail for synopsis purposes, and this can confuse your editor, leading her to ask unwanted questions.
- Be sure to cover the expectations readers have of your genre. In a romance, for instance, your synopsis must show the hero/ine falling in love. You will have to discuss the first kiss and the primary love scene, as well as the conflicts that arise from them to move the romantic conflict forward. In a mystery, your synopsis must show the sleuth solving the crime. You will have to discuss clues, red herrings, and suspects, especially as they present obstacles to the sleuth's goal of uncovering the identity of the murderer.

Never forget that your synopsis is a sales tool.

While it must be polished, free of grammatical and spelling errors, the truth is, no one will ever see it except your agent and editor. Many fine authors write lousy synopses. Synopses and query letters are not the measure of your talent, or even of your sales potential, so don't obsess over them. Do your best to convey the story in an emotionally moving/exciting way. And trust that, with all things equal, your first three Chapters will seduce the editor into asking to read the rest of your manuscript.

Best of luck to you in all your writing endeavors!

RESEARCH: INTERVIEWING SOURCES IN THE FIELD

(Note: This article, by yours truly, was originally printed in Romantic Times Magazine under another title.)

Like most historical writers, I visit the library to pore over dusty diaries and crumbling tomes. But this kind of fact-searching can be tedious. Dazed by all that reading, I eventually stagger into the sunshine like a modern-day Rip Van Winkle and interrogate some hapless pedestrian to make sure the world hasn't passed me by.

As helpful as a library can be, it has its limitations. A book won't let you experience the twang of a Texas drawl. And books sure don't get the twinkle in their eyes when they spin yarns about double-dares, moonless nights and forbidden forays into Farmer Evans' watermelon patch. Only a chat with a real-life mischief-maker can inspire you with anecdotes like that.

If you're a writer who habitually shies away from interviews, you're doing yourself a disservice. A reliable source can cut your research reading in half and give you more time for writing.

Sources don't fall out of the trees, though, so you'll have to do some legwork. That's when community relations and public affairs liaisons become your best friends.

For my first novel, award-winning *Texas Outlaw*, I had to work my way around the Texas Department of Public Safety switchboard to land an interview with a Texas Ranger. I finally talked to Rocky, a blessedly patient sergeant who spent three hours answering all my questions, including the inane ones, such as, "Which side do you pin your badge on?" Rocky dispensed valuable information, including the fact that Texas Rangers are forbidden to wear black Stetsons. For the good guys, only white or light gray hats will do.

ADVENTURES IN RESEARCH (CONT.)

Unfortunately, Rocky could only speak with authority on modern-day crime-fighting, so I drove to Waco's Texas Ranger Museum to research Ranger operations in 1875. I learned that these law-fighters were dubbed "Rangers" because they were originally hired to "range" across Texas. That meant I had to make Cord Rawlins a U.S. Marshal in Texas Outlaw if I wanted him to track my lady train robber across state lines.

Fortunately, I got to use my Ranger research when creating *Texas Lover's* Wes Rawlins, whose antics earned him an K.I.S.S. award from *Romantic Times Magazine*.

While researching *Texas Wildcat*, the third book in my Texas Trilogy, I hit the trail again. The Texas Department of Agriculture sent me to Blanco County where I interviewed a goat, sheep and cattle breeder who could trace her ancestry to the original Austin Colony. Coni also happened to be the first woman to win the national Soil Conservation Rancher of the Year Award.

But I knew I had a real gem in this source when she confided she read historical romances. Coni's familiarity with my genre gave her insight into the research process. She was able to volunteer important facts such as, "You don't want your heroine lambing out on the prairie, Adrienne. Those animals will need a sheltered environment. Put your heroine's sheep pens inside a box canyon."

Watching Coni at work with her border collie, Fran, I quickly lost my notions about the "romance" of ranching. Coni and Fran singlehandedly worked four ranches in three counties. No drop-dead gorgeous cowboys were waiting by the barn to help Coni haul 50-pound bags of feed, which she hauled one at a time on her shoulder, to the livestock pen.

Coni was a refreshing combination of straight-forward talk, no-nonsense business and feminine charm. I knew I had to model Bailey, the heroine in *Texas Wildcat*, after her. My interview with Coni saved me hours of library research because she was an authority on screw worm, ear-notching and veterinary procedures.

As for the animals, I admired the feisty Fran as she herded the goats, despite the threat of two guard dogs that out-weighed her by 100 pounds. My favorite moment, though, came from a kidd, which I watched with mouth agape, climb a tree to munch leaves. That delightfully eye-opening experience found its way into *Texas Wildcat*.

Let's face it: research can be tedious, but it doesn't have to be dry. By interviewing people, you gather a treasure trove of anecdotes and insights to make your writing memorable.

Tips for Overcoming the Research Blues:

- Get over the idea that you don't have to do research, because you're writing a contemporary novel. Even if you're an expert on the climate, flora and fauna, and street layout of the town in which you've set your story, you'll still probably have to research some aspect of your protagonist's or antagonist's professions. (I mean, do you REALLY know every gory detail on how to perform an autopsy? Or the names and uses of all the high-tech spy equipment used for night-time surveillance?)
- For interviews, take along a tape recorder with a counter (so you can jot notes on your tablet about where important information is recorded on the tape) and several extra supplies of tapes and batteries. However, don't RELY on tape recorders. They tend to attract natural disasters. (We former journalists can say this with authority.) Always carry a notebook and lots of extra writing implements while you're out in the field, researching your novel. (Pens run out of ink; pencil points break...you get the idea.) I let the tape record the full interview; I write notes about the details I find particularly interesting, humorous, etc. This way, I have a back up. Better yet, I don't have to rewind the tape a hundred times, looking for specific information.
- As for you armchair researchers (ie, folks who don't have the bucks to fly to Europe or the security clearance to hang out at NASA), there are gazillions of wonderful research sources on the Internet and - go figure! - at your local library. Trying to list them all here would be like writing another book! However, in the pages that follow, you'll find a list of some general reference materials.
- Visit the nearest University and get yourself a library card. University libraries are especially valuable for historical, technical, and scientific research. Then, if you're a big schmoozer like me, you should become warm close personal friends with the head reference librarian, 'cause these people know their stuff. (Mine's so versed in Texas history, she doesn't even have to look up answers to my questions, as offbeat as they can be.)
- Another valuable source for information is the "library" kept by your local writer's group. Not only do some organizations keep books on hand for their members, they keep audio and video cassettes of workshops from various writing conferences throughout the years. Do not underestimate the value of these tapes as research tools!

Staying Organized: The Big Challenge

Okay, you've done your research. Good for you. Now you've got to develop some kind of system so you can go back and find all those jewels you dredged up at the library. (Sure. You've got a photographic memory, right?)

Get in the habit of cataloguing your sources. I still favor the method I was taught in high school, namely, to fill out an index card for every book and magazine (and now websites, too) that I use in my research. Why? Well, say you found a handy article on "Underwear through the Ages" in a back issue of *Ladies Home Journal*. Or was that *Godey's Lady's Book*? And who the devil was the author?

Trust me, folks, you will ask these questions one of these days, if not for your own research needs, then to satisfy some New York copy editor, whose job it is to question every fact in your book. Don't believe me? Here are examples of true horror stories:

- One of my writing buddies was confronted by a copy editor who scoffed at her "far-fetched" notion that Scottish Highlanders walked around butt-naked under their kilts. (Honey, they DID.)
- Another friend of mine had her book rejected because the editor just didn't believe (and I quote) that "a cowboy would ride a horse around a corral, in the moonlight, without wearing a shirt." (It's amazing what New Yorkers think about Texans.)
- One of my copy editors once questioned my use of the term "Spring" while it was May in Texas. (Uh . . . to the best of my knowledge, Texas hasn't seceded from the NORTHERN HEMISPHERE, ma'am.)

Folks, if you can't satisfy the copy editor that you actually do have a legitimate source, you'll be forced to trash your pithy details. So get yourself organized! (And no, wads of sticky notes, plastered above your computer in haphazard order, does NOT constitute organized. Imagine what might happen if your cat decides it likes the taste of glue. Or worse, a brisk wind blows through the window.)

Index Cards

Here's a list of the information I put on my index cards and then store safely in a box. I consider these items the bare-bones minimum:

- *For books:* title, author, publisher, publisher's address, ISBN, "card catalog number" (as assigned by the local library) and the page numbers where I found the information

- *For magazines:* publication's name, volume number, month/year of publication, article title, author of article, page numbers, "card catalog number" (as assigned by the local library).
- *For websites:* main URL, sub URLs, authors of articles (if applicable), and the date I surfed the site (Sites get updated, you know!) I've also gotten into the habit of printing and filing a hard copy, just in case I need to prove to some trouble-making editor that the website actually did exist prior to disappearing from cyberspace.
- *For interviews:* Name of interviewee, work title, company, phone/cell/fax numbers, email, snail mail, way s/he prefers to be contacted (if s/he prefers telephone calls, I note the best time of day to call her/him). I note the date of interview and the date of follow-up interviews (if applicable). I also assign a name or number to the cassette tape I recorded during our interview and log this information on the index card. As for the tapes themselves, I either a) have them transcribed and file the transcription in a safe place or b) clearly label them and add them to the appropriate box of cassettes: "Wild West Research," "Medieval Research," etc.

Of course, you may develop your own methods, methods that work far better than mine. More power to you. (Personally, I'm waiting for the day when I can hire a secretary to organize me.) Several people, who obviously abhor the thought of browsing through dusty tomes, have asked me about sending their spouse or writing partner out to do research. Sure. Do whatever works for you.

But for me, letting someone else do my research wouldn't work. While I pore over a stack of books, I often read passages that trigger ideas. Sometimes I stumble across cross-reference materials, maps, or fellow researchers who tickle my brainstorming gene and inspire me with concepts for freelance articles totally unrelated to my intended area of research.

If I hired somebody, it's unlikely that s/he would come back with the same results. She'd find exactly what I told her to find (like a good employee), and I'd lose out on the offbeat ideas. That's why I'll sacrifice an afternoon in front of the T.V. to visit my local library.

BOOKS TO ENHANCE YOUR PERSONAL RESEARCH LIBRARY

Thousands of great books have been written for writers. I've included only a smattering here. If you'd like to find additional titles, a good place to start your research is at <http://www.writersdigest.com/catalog>. In fact, many of the books listed below can be ordered from that website.

CRAFTING FICTION: GENERAL

How to Write a Damn Good Novel (Volumes I & II)

By James N. Frey

The Writer's Digest Guide to Manuscript Formats

By Dian Buchman and Seli Groves

Write Fiction to Sell

By Joyce Brandon

The Portable Writers' Conference: Your Guide to Getting and Staying Published

Edited By Stephen Blake Mettee

BOOKS ON CHARACTERIZATION:

Fiction is Folks

by Robert Newton Peck

Goal, Motivation, and Conflict

By Debra Dixon

Reinventing Your Life

By Jeffery E. Young, Ph.D.
and Janet S. Klosko, Ph.D.

Linda Goodman's Sun Signs

By Linda Goodman

*Men are from Mars,
Women are from Venus*

By John Gray, Ph.D.

Characters and Viewpoint

By Orson Scott Card

The Character-Naming Sourcebook (a Writer's Digest Book)

By Sherrilyn Kenyon

The Writers Journey, Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters

by Christopher Vogler

PLOT, STYLE, & STORY STRUCTURE:

Beyond Style: Mastering the Finer Points of Writing

By Gary Provost

Scene & Structure

By Jack M. Bickman

The Elements of Style

By William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White

Techniques of the Selling Writer

By Dwight V. Swain

RESEARCH BOOKS: GENERAL

The Writer's Book of Checklists

By Scott Edelstein

The Writer's Complete Guide to Conducting Interviews

By Michael Schumacher

Knowing Where to Look: The Ultimate Guide to Research

By Lois Horowitz

The New York Public Library Book of Chronologies

By Bruce Wetterau

The Encyclopedia of World Costume

By Doreen Yarwood

Fashion in Costume 1200-1980

By Joan Nunn

Costume 1066-1966 (This book contains illustrations only)

By John Peacock

What's What:

A Visual Glossary of Everyday Objects from Paper Clips to Passenger Ships

By Reginald Bragonier, Jr. and David Fisher

Deadly Doses: A Writers Guide to Poisons

By Serita Deborah Stevens, RN, BSN

Armed and Dangerous: A Writer's Guide to Weapons

By Michael Newton

Body Trauma: A Writer's Guide to Wounds and Injuries

By David W. Page, M.D.

RESEARCH BOOKS: BY GENRE

Historical Novels:

The “Writer’s Guide to Everyday Life” Series
Published by Writer’s Digest Books

Examples of titles:

The Writer’s Guide to Everyday Life in the 1800s by Marc McCutcheon
The Writer’s Guide to Everyday Life in the Middle Ages by Sherrilyn Kenyon
The Writer’s Guide to Everyday Life from Prohibition to World War II
by Marc McCutcheon

(In addition to fabulous research material, these books supply appendices full of “further reading”)

How to Write and Sell Historical Fiction and Get It Published
By Persia Woolley

Atlas of British History: 118 Maps from 50 BC to the Present
By Martin Gilbert

Life in a Medieval Castle
By Joseph and Frances Gies
(For castle research, also visit www.castles-of-britain.com)

English Through the Ages
By William Brohaugh

Western Novels:

The Writer’s Guide to Everyday Life in the Wild West
By Candy Moulton

Dictionary of the American West:
5,000 Terms and Expressions from “a-going and a-coming” to Zuni
By Winifred Blevins

Scrapbook of the American West
By Ernest L. Reedstrom

Authentic Costumes & Characters of the Old West

By E. Lisle Reedstrom (This book includes color plates of illustrations)

The Prairie Traveler: The Best-selling Handbook for America's Pioneers

By Randolph B. Marcy, Captain, U.S. Army

(Originally published in 1859, this book is awesome, if you can find the reprint!

Here's what you'll need to give your local bookstore: ISBN: 0-918222-89-3

Or write to Applewood Books c/o The Globe Pequot Press, 138 West Main Street, Chester, CT 06412)

Science Fiction and Fantasy Novels:

The Writer's Complete Fantasy Reference

The Editors of Writer's Digest Books

Time Travel

By Paul J. Nahin

Aliens and Alien Societies

By Stanley Schmidt

Space Travel

By Ben Bova & Anthony R. Lewis

Romance Novels:

How to Write a Romance

By Kathryn Falk

You Can Write a Romance

By Rita Clay Estrada and Rita Gallagher

How to Write Romances

By Phyllis Taylor Pianka

Mystery Novels & Thrillers:

You Can Write a Mystery

By Gillian Roberts

Howdunit: The All-in-One Writer's Crime Reference

Edited By John Boertlein

Amateur Detectives:
A Writer's Guide to How Private Citizens Solve Criminal Cases
By Elaine Raco Chase and Anne Wingate, Ph.D.

Malicious Intent:
A Writer's Guide to How Murderers, Robbers, Rapists, & Other Criminals Think
By Sean P. Mactire

Police Procedural: A Writer's Guide to the Police and How They Work
By Russell Bintliff

Cause of Death:
A Writer's Guide to Death, Murder, and Forensic Medicine
By Keith D. Wilson, M.D.

Code Blue:
A Writer's Guide to Hospitals, Including the ER, OR, and ICU
By Dr. Keith Wilson and Dr. David Page

Order in the Court: A Writer's Guide to the Legal System
By David S. Mullally

BOOKS FOR MARKETING:

The Writers Market (find the latest edition)
(Each year, there's a new editor)

The Writers Market: Internet Edition (find the latest edition)
(Each year, there's a new editor)

Writers Online Marketplace
By Debbie Ridpath Ohi

Novel and Short Story Writer's Market (find the latest edition)
(Each year, there's a new editor)

How to Write a Book Proposal
By Michael Larsen

How to Write Irresistible Query Letters

By Lisa Collier Cool

The Guide to Literary Agents (find the latest edition)

(Each year, there's a new editor)

Literary Agents:

What they Do, How They Do It, & How to Find and Work with the Right One for You

By Michael Larsen

Insider's Guide to Getting a Literary Agent

By Lori Perkins

The American Directory of Writer's Guidelines: What Editors Want, What Editors Buy

Edited and Compiled by John C. Mutchler

BOOKS FOR WRITER'S BLOCK:

Writing from the Body

By John Lee

The Courage to Write: How Writers Transcend Fear

By Ralph Keyes

The Artist's Way

By Julia Cameron

Break Writer's Block Now: A Proven System

By Jerrold Mendis

Steering the Craft

By Ursula K. LeGuin

Writing from the Inner Self

By Elaine Farris Hughes

Zen in the Art of Writing

By Ray Bradbury

Creative Visualization

By Shakti Gawain

Writing Down the Bones

By Natalie Goldberg

The Fiction Writer's Silent Partner

By Martin Roth

Mindmapping: Your Personal Guide to Exploring Creativity and Problem-Solving

By Joyce Wycoff

NATIONAL WRITERS' ORGANIZATIONS

American Crime Writers League

ACWL.org

Authors Guild

AthorsGuild.org

Horror Writers Association

Horror.org

International Thriller Writers, Inc.

ThrillerWriters.org

Mystery Writers of America

MysteryWriters.org

National Writers Association

NationalWriters.com

Private Eye Writers of America

ThrillingDetective.com

Romance Writers of America

RWAnational.com

Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America

SFWA.org

Sisters in Crime

SistersInCrime.org

Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators

SCBWI.org

Western Writers of America

WesternWriters.org

Writers' League of Texas (considered one of the largest regional associations)

WritersLeague.org

Young Adult Romance Writers

YoungAdultRomanceWriters.com

APPENDIX

In this section:

- Sample of the narrative synopsis that sold *Texas Outlaw* to Bantam Books
- Prologue of *Scoundrel for Hire*, annotated to show the characters' goals, motivations, and conflicts

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Historical Romance
Approx. 100,000 words

SYNOPSIS OF *TEXAS OUTLAW*

*[Note to Writing Students: This document is an example of a Narrative Synopsis. I've **bolded** vital elements, such as character goals and pivotal plot points. Also note the dearth of secondary characters: the actual book contains approximately 40. One weakness of this document: limited information is given about the hero's background, goals, and motivations, mainly because I was told by my agent to limit this synopsis to four pages.]*

When Fancy Holleday helps her lover rob a government train, her life changes faster than a speeding locomotive. **(Narrative Hook)**

Born in a whorehouse, **(Background, Heroine)** Fancy was rescued from that profession by a Barbary Coast kingpin. Life with Diego Santana has often been harsh, since his hair-trigger temper makes him physically abusive; still, **Fancy believes she loves him, (Motivation)** and for seven years, she dreams of becoming his wife. That dream is brutally shattered in December of 1874, when she watches Diego get gunned down by U.S. Deputy Marshal Cord Rawlins.

Convinced that Diego is dead, (Motivation) Fancy tricks Cord and flees Carson City with two of four U.S. Treasury minting plates. **She vows to make Cord Rawlins pay for killing the only love she has known. (Fancy's Story Goal).**

Fancy's successful escape makes Cord a laughingstock at the U.S. Marshal's

Office, and **he sets out to redeem himself. (Cord's Story Goal)**. But Fancy continues to elude him, mysteriously disappearing from the custody of local lawmen. Based on their initial encounter, Cord thinks she must have seduced every lawman she has met. **He believes her an accomplished tease who uses men to gratify her vanity, (Cord's Motivation to Avoid Falling in Love)** and he is determined not to become another of her marks. **Besides, no woman on earth could possibly compare with his beloved wife, who died two years ago in childbirth. (Cord's Internal Conflict About Love)**

Cord finally arrests Fancy in Fort Worth; however, he can't seem to shake his two teenage brothers, whom he has raised since early childhood. **Hellbent on adventure, the boys appoint themselves his deputies and promptly develop huge crushes on Fancy. (Subplot, Secondary Characters, External Conflict)** Cord worries that she will turn his boys into men right before his horrified eyes.

But Fancy has a code of honor against deflowering innocents. Instead, she tries every trick she knows on Cord, goading him into a kiss **(Genre Requirement: First Kiss)**.

Afterward, he's cooler than ever, and his resistance to her charms drives her crazy with self-doubt. More aggravating still are his integrity and his sense of fairness. He proves repeatedly that he is not the kind of woman-using cad she can despise. **His behavior makes her begin to question her own morality--not to mention Diego's (Fancy's Conflict; First Major Turning Point in the Romance)**. Fancy convinces herself that she can never hope to spark tender feelings in an honorable man, like Cord.

(Condensation of Plot: Pivotal Scenes) Nothing is further from the truth. Cord is impressed by Fancy's quick-thinking and her grit, especially during a Comanche attack. Later, when she risks her life to keep his brothers safe from one of his enemies, **Cord suspects he has misjudged her. (Cord's New Motivation)**. The final proof comes when she lets down her guard and slips off her chemise. He is outraged to spy the whip scars inflicted by Diego Santana. At last Cord understands that Fancy is a lonely woman whom men have always used. **The problem is, he's sworn to bring her in no matter how much he worries--or cares--about her. (Cord's New Conflict)**

Cord makes love to Fancy, hoping to prove that tenderness does exist in the world. **(Genre Requirement: First Love Scene)** Afterward, he convinces her to return with him to Nevada. In exchange for the governor's pardon, she agrees to go undercover with Cord to locate the second pair of minting plates. **(Next Phase of Plot)** But now that she realizes Diego is in state prison, awaiting trial, she fears he may blame her for his capture. **She is torn between her belief that he offers her the closest thing to love she may ever know, and her deep-seated fear that he may seek revenge against her if he is acquitted. (Secondary Character, External Conflict, Fancy's New Motivation)**. Sneaking him a message, she swears she is helping Cord break the counterfeiting ring only so she and Diego can be together again. **(Foreshadowing Disaster)**

Fancy's repeated declarations of love for Diego make Cord jealous. She seems blind to the fact that the outlaw is vindictive and dangerous. Cord cannot understand this

misguided loyalty, and he decides he must somehow open her eyes. **Even old feelings for his wife can no longer keep Cord from admitting privately that he loves Fancy.**

(Second Major Turning Point in the Romance.) He sets out to make her realize he is the better man. **(Cord's New Goal)**

As Fancy's business relationship with Cord develops into a passionate affair, she grows more confused about her feelings. A long history binds her to Diego, yet Cord is the kind of man whom she has always wanted. **(Fancy's Inner Conflict Escalates)**

Suddenly, word reaches her that Diego has escaped from jail. To force a showdown with the lawman who nearly got him hanged, **Diego kidnaps Cord's family.** **(New External Conflict/Plot Complications).**

Fancy is horrified to realize that she gave Diego the ammunition to hurt the people she has grown to love. (Fancy's New Motivation) Drugging Cord to keep him safe, she rides alone to rescue the hostages. **(Next Phase of Plot: Pivotal Scenes)**

Although she succeeds, Diego captures and beats her. Cord must ride to save her, but in the process, he is shot and overpowered by Diego. **Fancy is forced to choose between them. (Black Moment)** **When Diego raises his knife for the final blow, Fancy fires, and Diego dies at her feet. (Climax)**

While Cord is busy finalizing her pardon, Fancy boards a stage coach. **She thinks her pardon will end their affair, and she cannot bear to face him for goodbyes. (Fancy's New Motivation).** **Furious when he learns she has eluded him once more,**

(Cord's New Motivation) Cord rides after her and halts the stage. Sweeping Fancy into his arms, he swears he will never chase her again. **He makes good on his vow: right then and there, he commands a traveling preacher to marry them (Resolution).**

The End.

SCOUNDREL FOR HIRE

By Adrienne de Wolfe

Avon Books ❖ ISBN 0-380-80527-8

PROLOGUE

[Note to Writing Students: I've bolded characterization and plot elements so you can see how to weave goals, motivations, and conflicts throughout your story.]

December, 1870

The cemetery was windswept and barren, a landscape of ice.

In all his fourteen years, Raphael Jones had never seen anything bleaker, not even during the war, when Jedidiah had burned furniture to keep the family warm.

That year, Rafe had believed he'd never see a worse Christmas Eve.

Then yesterday Mama had died. (Narrative Hook/Setting the Scene)

The ground was so frozen, the gravediggers had used axes to hack at the earth. Their torches had sputtered and hissed in the snow that had whooshed down from Kentucky's Pine Mountains. Standing alone to watch, Rafe had braved the sting of that storm, his limbs warmed by the rage that still seethed through his veins. The only part of him that could never be thawed was his heart. Finally, stripped of his last ounce of hope, he'd been forced to accept the raw truth: God didn't care about him or his prayers. **(A motivation that forges Rafe's behavior throughout the book.)**

Rafe's four-year-old sister stood beside him. One mittened hand holding his, the other clutching Mama's prayerbook, Sera gazed toward the icicles on the oak guarding Mama's grave. She was too young to understand. **Perhaps that was why she hadn't cried during the memorial service, not even after Jedidiah had barked, "Not another word, Seraphina. Not another word about ghosts, you hear me?"**

"Not ghosts, Papa," she'd piped up in childish innocence. "Angels. Beautiful angels with golden wings. Mama's dancing with them by the tree. Can't you see?"

(Mini Flashback/Sera's Character Development)

But Jedidiah Jones hadn't seen. Preacher Jones never saw anything unless it was blasphemous. **(Jedidiah's Story Motivation)** And Sera had been blasphemous, speaking of their dead mother and dancing. At least, that's what Jedidiah had raged in front of the mourners who'd shivered in his church, waiting impatiently for his eulogy to end so they could hurry home to their cheerful fires and Christmas hams.

Rafe knew he should be used to his adoptive father's ways, but today, Jedidiah's lack of compassion had made Rafe sick. As cold as it was, he'd bundled Sera and six-year-old Gabriel outside, past the black-plumed horses of the hearse, to the frozen mound that marked their mother's final resting place. Here, he'd thought, his kid brother and little sister could say good-bye the way they wanted to, without Jedidiah's scorn. **(Rafe's scene goal and motivation.)**

Unfortunately, Rafe was no longer sure he'd done the right thing. **(Internal Conflict)**

Beneath her ribboned baby cap, muff, and cape, Sera was shivering, even though he'd wrapped his scarf around her shoulders. Gabriel, when he wasn't coughing, was stamping his boots in his hated knickerbockers and ribbed wool stockings.

"Gabriel, you should take Sera inside now," Rafe said, his voice thick from unshed tears. "It's getting dark, and you look cold."

"I'm not cold," Gabriel said quickly, belying the evidence on his too pale face. **(First external conflict; plot starts to move forward.)** Despite the radiance that never left his eyes, Gabriel wasn't a healthy child. Jedidiah always said that radiance came from Gabriel's fevers. Mama used to say it was the mark of a servant of God. Personally, Rafe thought that gleam came from mischief, since Gabriel was happiest sneaking frogs into the house or tying Sera's shoelaces in knots. **(Gabriel's Character Development)**

"Rafe?" Sera was tugging on his hand. "Do we have to go inside? I want to stay out here with Mama."

"Me too." Gabriel coughed for a moment then sniffed. "Do you reckon Mama knows we're here?"

"Of course she does," Sera answered brightly. "Angels always watch over children."

"Yeah?" Gabriel didn't look convinced. He reached down to fondle the ears of his spotted hound. "Say, do dogs go to heaven?"

"Sure." Sera parroted Mama: "'God loves all creatures great and small.' Right, Rafe?"

Sure. Every creature but me, he thought bitterly. He tore his eyes from his sister's guiltless face. He had no illusions about the disgrace he'd caused his mama, much less the shame he'd caused his family.

So why don't you get it over with, God? Why don't you strike me down so I can't destroy anyone else who loves me? **(Another motivation that drives Rafe throughout the story)**

Before God could oblige, saving innocents like Sera and Gabriel from the malignance in Rafe's soul, an angry young man called out from the church. "Sera! Where are you?" **(Most of this new character's development comes through Rafe's and the children's reactions/dialogue, and through physical description.)**

Sera caught her breath, and Rafe stiffened, recognizing his older brother's voice. **(Next external conflict, moving the plot forward)**

"Gabriel?" the young man called this time. "Answer me!"

Both Sera and Gabriel shrank closer to Rafe.

"Uh-oh. Michael sounds mad," Gabriel whispered behind his palm. "Should we hide?"

Sera nodded, her eyes as round as moons. Together, they glanced around the cemetery, more worried about a spanking than pneumonia. Rafe watched, uncertain what to advise, until they spied the icy steps of a tomb. When their faces lit up like twin candles, Rafe envisioned broken bones.

"Hold on," he warned, grabbing their coat collars before they could run. Unfortunately, the oldest Jones sibling rounded the corner in time to see Rafe restrain the children.

"When they didn't answer, I should have known you were to blame," Michael Jones called across the churchyard. "Never mind that it's Christmas. Or that Mama was laid to rest today. You just can't let a single minute go by without sinning, can you?"

The old guilt ate at Rafe's gut. **(Internal Conflict)** He neutralized its acid with anger. Let Michael and every other hypocrite in his father's congregation say he was spawned by Satan. Now that Mama was gone, the gossip couldn't hurt her.

(Comparison/Contrast of Michael and Rafe as complex characters.) Michael threw open the cemetery gate and stomped inside, making the children squirm. He was a tall, broad-shouldered boy for his sixteen years, weighing a good twenty pounds more than Rafe. To see them together - Rafe with his tawny locks, Michael with his blue-black curls - most folks had a hard time believing they were brothers.

Maybe that's because they weren't, Rafe thought resentfully. Not full brothers, anyway.

Jedidiah had suffered the proof of Mama's adultery like the Christian martyr he was, deigning to raise her bastard as his own son. In his heart, though, Rafe knew Jedidiah had fed and clothed him only because he'd wanted the pleasure of watching Mama repent every day. Jedidiah Jones hated Rafe.

And Michael was his father's son. **(Michael's motivation throughout story.)**

Hastily wiping away the proof of his grief, Rafe straightened his spine. He wasn't going to let Michael catch him in a weak moment. **(Rafe's new scene goal.)** No one, not even Jedidiah, had a tongue that lashed like Michael's. Most folks figured Michael would follow in his father's footsteps and become a shepherd of the Lord.

Rafe just knew his brother would grow up to be a hanging judge.

Halting two paces from the children, Michael planted his fists on his hips and glared at Rafe. "Well? What do you have to say for yourself?" **(Throughout the following pages, watch how dialogue is used to escalate the conflict/emotional tension of the scene.)**

"I don't answer to you."

"That's your trouble, Raphael. You don't answer to anyone."

"Yeah? Well, I reckon I'll just go to hell then."

"Not if Papa has anything to say about it. You're woodshed-bound, boy."

Turning his shoulder in dismissal, Michael next faced his youngest brother. Gabriel hastily put his hound between them. In spite of the child's defiance, Michael's blue eyes softened. **(Deeper insight into Michael; he has potential to grow and change.)** "You were coughing all night again, Gabriel. I don't want you getting any sicker. Let's go." He held out his hand.

"I'm not sick like he is," Sera said, tossing her dark ringlets. "I'm staying here with Mama." **(Escalating scene conflict)**

"You can't, Sera. Mama's dead. She's underground," Michael added, as if to soften the reminder.

"No, she's not. She's over there." Sera waved at the tree. When she blew it a kiss, Michael pressed his lips together, much like his father always did.

"Papa told you not to talk that way. Now come on. You're coming with me and Gabriel." With his free hand, he tugged the prayerbook out of her grasp.

"Hey!"

"You know Mama's prayerbook's not a toy."

"Give it back!" Her soprano voice shrilled in panic. "I can't see Mama any more. I can't see the angels!" She threw herself after the treasure, but when Michael held it out of her reach, she started to sob, jumping up and down and grasping at thin air. "Mama, where are you? Mama, come back!" **(Sera's behavior motivates Rafe to challenge Michael once more.)**

Rafe took a stiff step closer. "Give her the prayerbook, Michael." **(Proof that Rafe is capable of heroic behavior, despite his youthful shortcomings.)**

Wrestling with both children now, Michael glared daggers at him. "This is more of your influence, I'll wager."

"Saints don't wager," Rafe flung back. "Or maybe you've been led astray by those dime novels you've been hiding in your Bible."

Michael's cheeks mottled. The prayerbook dropped, and the children dived after it.

But Michael didn't notice. He was too busy clenching his fists.

"Profligate."

"You don't even know what that means," Rafe retorted, rallying the sass everyone had come to expect from him. "You just heard *him* say it once, and you figured it was bad."

"Yeah? Well, I don't need Papa to tell me what bastard means. You're not fooling anyone, Raphael. *She* wasn't fooling anyone."

"You leave Mama out of this," he warned, taking a step closer and clenching his own fists.

"Out of what? The truth?" Michael's lip curled. "You came into the world, and you ruined her."

"I did not!"

"Mama could have gone to heaven if it wasn't for you. I don't know how you can stand to live with yourself."

Rafe reeled at this nearly mortal blow. Was it true? Was his beloved mother burning in hell because of him?

"You're lying," he choked. "Mama is too in heaven."

"Whores don't go to heaven," Michael growled, his eyes narrowing in accusation.

"No!" Rafe grabbed his taller brother's coat lapels. "You take that back. Mama is not a whore!" **(Rafe's motivation for brawl)**

"Take your hands off me, filth!"

Michael shoved, and Rafe swung. In the next instant, they toppled onto the grave. Kicking and punching, cursing and howling, they fought like Cain and Abel. Rafe could see little more than the hail of dirt and snow as his fists rained down on his brother's mouth. His only thought was to silence that lashing tongue forever.

Michael fought back, though, more devil than saint. Tearing at Rafe's hair, jabbing at Rafe's nose, he landed blow after ear-ringing blow as they rolled, locked in mortal combat. Fourteen years of bitter rivalry for their mother's affection were unleashed in that explosion of rage. Rafe thought he might have killed his brother if he'd had the size and strength to stay on top. The thought scared him - scared him enough to miss a punch. Michael's gloves promptly closed over his windpipe.

(Enter Jedidiah, the next external conflict) "Raphael!" Jedidiah's horrified cry pierced the pounding in Rafe's ears. "Raphael Jacob, unhand your brother at once!"

Rafe's shirt collar twisted, jerking him back with such force that he nearly strangled in the noose of his tie. For a moment he wheezed, flailing backward through steam clouds of breath; in the next instant, he slammed shoulder-first into a fence post.

"Michael!" Jedidiah reached for his favorite, but Michael was already climbing to his feet, dabbing his split lip with his scarf. Rafe, swiping the snow from his eyes, was more glad to see the tears on Michael's cheeks than the blood.

"Michael Elijah, what has he done to you?" Jedidiah cried, reaching out again.

"Nothing," Michael muttered and shrugged his father off.

(More character development for Jedidiah) Jedidiah's chest heaved. In his stark black frockcoat, which hid the levity of his white collar, Jedidiah looked more intimidating than usual. He'd always been physically powerful, his size better suited for smithing. Rafe had heard the whispers, that Jedidiah was the antithesis of his real father, a reportedly slender, jovial man who'd humbugged entire towns as part of a traveling salvation show. Rafe still couldn't understand why his papa would abandon him. Was he that despicable? **(Another motivation for Rafe's behavior throughout the book.)**

"A brawl. A brawl in my churchyard!" Jedidiah rounded on Rafe, and the children slinked out of his way. "How dare you raise a fist in anger here. Have you forgotten what day this is?"

Mama's burial day. Rafe winced as shame lashed through him. *Mama, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry! Please don't hate me for fighting on your -*

"Christmas," Jedidiah sputtered, while Rafe remained too upset to speak. "It's Christmas Day!"

Bile burned its way to Rafe's throat. Why should it stun him that Jedidiah Jones hadn't thought first of his dead wife?

"Wherever I find the devil's work, Raphael, I seem to find you," the preacher railed. "In my charity, I took you in. I gave you my name. I sought to save you from your sins, and what gratitude do you show me? You strike my first-born! You spill his blood on his mother's grave! Wicked, willful, spiteful child, what have you to say for yourself?"

Rafe climbed slowly to his feet. His shoulder throbbed. His left eye was swollen half shut, and his nose trickled blood. But with Mama gone, there was no one to notice, much less care. Certainly the preacher who'd pretended to be his father all these years didn't.

Rafe glanced longingly at Michael, standing so rigidly and glaring at him. For a moment, he remembered a lonely, desperate time when he'd wanted his brother to like him, to play with him, to give him just ten minutes of the attention Jedidiah had denied him. **(Motivation for Rafe's defiance.)** Gabriel had eventually come along to fill that need, and then Sera, but by that time, Rafe had grown leery of loving anyone. The children were still too young to understand why he was "unwashed and unholy," as Jedidiah had once described him. They would grow older, though, and when they did, Michael would teach them.

As Jedidiah had taught Michael.

Raising his head, Rafe met the preacher's gaze with a hard-won dignity and a smoldering stare. "I say nothing. God is my witness. Let Him be my judge."

Jedidiah purpled, as Rafe knew he would.

"Salvation is far from your grasp, young man, as your impudence attests!" He pointed what Rafe secretly called The Forefinger of Doom. "Heed me well, Raphael. The wages of sin are death and eternal damnation! As long as you fall short of the glory of God, it is up to me to see you repent.

"Therefore, you will take yonder shovel and repair the damage to your mother's grave. You will walk home to cool your temper. And when you arrive, you will receive twenty

lashes for the injuries you inflicted upon your brother."

Rafe's jaw dropped. "What about *my* injuries?"

"Aunt Claudia can see to them once you've been disciplined."

Rafe clamped his mouth closed on the futility of argument. Once again, Michael was presumed innocent, while he suffered the responsibility and the punishment. **It was unjust. It was unkind. More than that, it was unbearable. (Motivation underlying Rafe's next scene goal: to run away.)**

"Seraphina," Jedidiah barked, "Gabriel, go to the wagon."

The children tensed like fiddle strings as they became the focus of their father's attention. Taking a nervous step toward the gate, Sera hesitated, then raised worried eyes to her father.

"Papa," she asked timidly, "what's a whore?"

"To the wagon," he ordered ominously. "*Now.*"

She gasped, scampering for the gate. Rafe's scarf slid off her shoulders. Gabriel, too intimidated to pick it up, ran with his dog after his sister. His coughs echoed in the brittle air.

Jedidiah retrieved the shovel. Thrusting it into the snow, he left the handle quivering by Mama's marker before he turned his back on Rafe and strode away.

Michael was the last to go. For a moment, he stood broad and foreboding, a hulking shadow that all but obliterated the setting sun. With his breaths curling before him, he

reminded Rafe of an angry bull.

Suddenly, Michael stooped. Pulling the scarf from the snow, he shook it off and tossed it at Rafe.

"Here," he said grudgingly. "You'll need this."

Then he was gone. **(Further proof that Michael can be redeemed.)**

Rafe's fists tightened over the scarf. He stood that way for many minutes, his heart pounding into his ribs, his throat nearly too tight to breathe. A dusting of flurries tumbled from the sky.

At last he spied the buckboard. It bounced over the frozen ruts and headed down the hill. Seated in the back, the children turned toward him, their little bodies jolting beneath their brazier-warmed blankets. Sera raised her mitten to wave good-bye. After a moment, Gabriel did too.

A tear spilled down Rafe's cheek. Angrily, he dashed it away. Tossing the scarf around his neck, he grabbed the shovel and plunged it into the snow. Dirt was hopelessly scattered throughout the drifts; still, he did his best to dig it up, to pack it down and make amends.

"I know you're in heaven, Mama," he muttered. "Good people go there."

That's why I won't.

He bowed his head and rattled off his prayers. Mama had taught him the words. To hear him pray had made her happy, so for her sake, he recited every one he could think of.

He knew he wouldn't be saying them again, not after this day.

Shoving his hands in his pockets, he cleared his throat, searching for something real and meaningful to say. He told his mama he loved her. He told her he was glad she was in a happy place at last. He asked her not to worry about him anymore. Then he said goodbye.

Turning from his mother's grave, Rafe forged a path through the snow away from Jedidiah's house. He didn't have a plan in mind; he just walked down, down, down the hill, too stubborn to let the bitter blasts of night knock him off his feet.

At least if I reach hell, I'll stay warm.

A livery stable huddled at the foot of the hill. He'd helped paint the building, and he knew the animals well. He figured the owner would be drunk and snoring somewhere as usual, so Rafe decided to steal a horse. It would serve the old man right for beating his animals. Besides, what difference would it make? Stealing a horse, saving a horse - it was all the same when your soul was damned. **(Since the horse was abused, we can forgive its theft.)**

"You're mine now, Belle," he told the filly after he'd saddled her and led her out into the moonlight. She didn't seem opposed to the idea, which made him feel better. Damned or not, he still had a conscience. He supposed he'd have to work a little harder not to care.

(New motivation to carry him throughout story.)

Reining in at the city limits sign, he pulled up his collar and tightened his scarf. His

teeth were chattering, and his hands were nearly numb. It occurred to him he should have stolen food and some blankets, not to mention extra gloves and a box of matches. The problem was, he'd never stolen anything, excluding Belle. He'd never run away before either. Now what should he do?

He squinted into the frosty luminescence of the wilderness. A tendril of smoke curled against the moon. In the distance, he could just make out a caravan of wagons in the silvery drifts. His heart thumped faster with hope. He suspected he'd found the theatrical troop Jedidiah had helped chase out of town two days ago. They must have been caught in the ensuing storm.

"Thespians are harlots, liars, thieves, and drunkards," Jedidiah had thundered, no doubt still fuming over the actor who had played him for a cuckold nearly fifteen years ago. *"Let Satan's disciples peddle sin elsewhere."*

Blinking the flurries off his lashes, Rafe gave his horse a mirthless smile. "It seems kind of fitting, eh, Belle, that I join those lost souls now?"

A good three miles later, he was shivering uncontrollably and beating his fist against the door of a painted wagon. Scantly clad cupids and sighing ladies adorned the mural, the focal point of which was the dimpled and derbyed man who flexed exaggerated arm muscles on either side of the door. The portrait's face split open as the door swung wide, and Rafe blinked, dazzled by the starburst of light that silhouetted the behemoth looming over him. The man's head was hairless save for the drooping moustaches that covered his mouth.

(Introduction of new secondary characters throughout these last paragraphs. Notice the brush-strokes used to imply a British dialect.)

"Bloody hell, it's a beggar. Be gone, brat. You won't find any handouts here."

Rafe raised his chin. A tantalizing blast of heat wafted out from behind the Brit - that and the mingled smells of mincemeat and rum. He had to get inside. It was inside or freeze, because he was not going back to the town of Blue Thunder. **(Rafe's new scene goal.)**

"I'm no beggar. I'm here about the job."

The behemoth snorted. "We aren't any Punch and Judy show. Get on with you, now."

(Escalating external conflict.)

A painted female face, afloat in a stiff cloud of blonde hair, appeared beside the door. The matron looked Rafe up and down, paying particular attention to the body parts below his waist. Her cagey green eyes lit appreciatively.

"Aw, the tyke looks cold, Freddie luv. Let 'im in. It's Christmas Day."

"We aren't a bloody orphanage, Fiona."

"He said he's here about the job," she cooed.

"That's right," Rafe said quickly, pointing to the wind-ripped billboard that flapped beside the door. "It says here you're looking for a Falstaff. I'm your man."

The two Thespians seemed to find this uproariously funny, and Rafe fidgeted beneath their guffaws. He had to admit, he didn't know what a Falstaff did, but he was good with a hammer and a paintbrush. Anything else he could learn. **(Insight into Rafe's character: he's quick-witted, willing to do whatever is necessary to survive.)**

"Know a lot about Shakespeare, do you?" Fred asked.

"Oh yes," Rafe lied, and quite well too, he thought, considering how little practice he'd had. **(Proof that at this point, Rafe really is an innocent.)** "He wrote some very fine plays."

Fiona snickered. "He's got nerve enough for the footlights."

"Hmm. Maybe you're right." Fred was smirking as he rubbed his chin. "'Fraid that's an old billboard, lad. That job's already been taken. By me." When Rafe's face fell, Fred added smoothly, "But you just might fit the bill for another show we're putting on in Louisville." He winked at Fiona.

She grinned. "Why, sure. He'd be perfect - once the swelling in his eye goes down."

Fred stepped aside, motioning Rafe up the step into the wagon. "What's your name, lad?"

Rafe loosed a ragged breath. The coals on their brazier had made the interior so toasty, he could feel a thaw moving through his limbs. "Rafe. But I can't leave my horse - "

"I'll see to your horse," Fred drawled, closing the door behind him. He laid a beefy arm across Rafe's shoulders. "So tell me. What do you know about *Romeo and Juliet*?"

(Scene ends in a question - a mini cliffhanger. We sense that Rafe's innocence is about to be stripped away forever by these two con artists.)