

# HOW TO WRITE A NOVEL

## Contents

- 1) *Choosing the right concept*
- 2) *Coming up with ideas*
- 3) *Build yourself an awesome plot*
- 4) *Check your plot*
- 5) *Create an unforgettable character*
- 6) *Dramatise, dramatise, dramatise*
- 7) *Write well*
- 8) *If you're writing for children*
- 9) *Reached the final fullstop: a checklist*
- 10) *Getting help and getting sold*

*The Writers' Workshop*

From Here to Publication



# Choosing the Right Concept

It's impossible to overstate the importance of your concept in terms of how successful your book becomes. Stephenie Meyer writes perfectly good, competent prose - but her story idea (ordinary girl falls for sexy vampire) turned her book into a cultural phenomenon. Dan Brown, Stieg Larsson, Stephen King are all similar: decent writers blessed with stunning ideas.

Agents know this and - no matter what your genre - a strong premise is essential to selling a book. Given any two broadly similar manuscripts, agents will almost always pick the one with the strongest central concept.

So how do you get the concept right? Easy! You do as follows.

## **Know the market**

The first thing to say is that you **MUST** know the market. That means reading a lot of contemporary fiction in your area. If you don't do that, you won't know the market, which means you will almost certainly misunderstand what literary agents are looking to take on, which in turn means that your book won't sell. And why should it? You are creating a product for a market and you haven't even conducted the basic research.

## **Understand your pitch**

As you start to come up with ideas for your book, try condensing them down to no more than 50-60 words, and ideally even less. You will quickly tell whether you have something that strikes a spark or not. Here are examples of pitches that could really work:

*Twilight*                      A teen romance between an ordinary American girl and a boy who is actually a vampire.

*The Da Vinci Code*        A mystery thriller revolving around the hunt for the Holy Grail.

*Wolf Hall*                    A historical epic revolving around Thomas Cromwell, the most important man in the court of King Henry VIII.

It's pretty obvious that Dan Brown's book had a killer premise – and that it was that which effectively sold the book. It certainly wasn't his prose style!

It's less obvious, but equally true that the vast success of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (a literary novel) also depended on finding a brilliant hook. If Mantel had written effectively the same book about a king / court / period that was less huge in the popular imagination, the book wouldn't have sold on anything like the same scale. Indeed, none of her previous ones did. The books had largely the same quality; they just hadn't found the seam of gold.

It's also easy to see which pitches really don't work. (These examples are invented, by the way. Books with bad pitches never get published.)

*Eco-fantasy for 6-7s* Three children go to a fantasy world where they have to save the planet and learn about the importance of recycling and the dangers posed by electro-magnetic radiation.

*Chick-lit for self-harmers* Katy is a feisty fashion-loving thirty-year-old who fancies the sexy photographer who freelances for her fashion mag. But Katy is a secret self-harmer whose troubles stem from a difficult childhood.

*Non-literary literary fiction* A slightly mediocre book about two somewhat boring people in whose lives nothing much seems to happen.

We honestly get books like these. We really do. So do literary agents. And they'll never work. If you don't have an instant, grabbing, easily communicated pitch you could be making a similar kind of mistake. The only way to know: write a pitch for your own book. Does it sound limp or strong? Experiment with different ways of couching it. See if you can add a little edge, something new, something vibrant. Even if you need to change the book to fit that pitch, you need to do it.

### **Don't cheat**

Self-deception is incredibly easy and incredibly dangerous to your chances of publication. The shorter the pitch, the less the opportunity for cheating. Try to keep the description of your book to as few words as possible. Does it still strike a spark? Write similar pitches for other bestselling books in your genre. Do those ones seem better? If the answer is yes, you need to go back to the drawing board.

## Coming up with ideas

Some writers are blessed with ideas that just force themselves out of the head and onto the page – a phenomenon that’s particularly common with first novels. But what if you’re not so blessed? Just how do you get your genius ideas? And how do you know if they’re good enough?

### **You probably already have your idea.**

Almost certainly, you have the worm of an idea squirming away somewhere. It’s not a question of forming the idea, but of recognising the one you already have. So do this. Make lists of:

- things you *daydream* about
- your special *interests* (medieval churches, IT security, tattoos)
- your areas of *expertise* (that might be something cool, like internet bank fraud, but it may well not be. Maybe you’re just an expert on swimming lessons for toddlers, social hierarchies at the school gate and how to get baby poo off a new dress. That’s still an expertise.)
- your current *passions* – things that get you off on a rant or long-winded explanation
- *things you loved as a child* – it’s amazing how often the child seems to predict the adult. Look back and see what you loved in the past.
- books and films *you loved as a child*
- *books you love now.*

Write actual lists of these things. Not in one single half hour session, but bit by bit, over time. Let things stew and bubble up. Almost certainly, you’ll find something nagging at you. Something that stays with you after you leave your lists. That right there is your idea.

### **Don’t expect miracles**

Trouble with ideas is that they seldom come fully formed. (My first novel was an exception – that did arrive pretty complete. All the rest have had to be hacked out of the rock.) But that’s fine. Development is easy and fun. The first thing to know, then, is that ideas take time. You don’t get from nowhere to perfect in one leap

### **Know the market**

For heaven’s sake, don’t try to develop your idea without knowing damn well the relevant bit of the market for fiction. That means you need to read the area you are going to write it. Read

widely. Stay current. Know the new names, not just the old ones. It's a massive mistake not to do this – and most new writers don't.

### **Start developing**

Get a sheet of paper and write down what you do know about your future book. That might be very little. It might be no more than this:

- Antarctic setting
- Scientific team
- Weird earth tremors, totally unexplained by science
- Some ultra-secret weapons testing

That's not a story. It has no characters, no plot arc, no meaningful line of development. but who cares? It's a start. So just stay with it. See what comes to you. Try out new things. Add new elements:

- ex-SAS man turned seismologist is out there.
- Has baggage from the past (a mission gone wrong?)
- meets Olga, glamorous Russian geologist

Do these new ideas work for you? How do they feel as you mull them over? I jolly well hope you think they're crap. The bits we've just added feel forced, clichéd, bland, generic. So let's try again. Scratch that last bit and instead add:

- Leila is a seismologist & triathlete (British)
- loves extreme adventure
- sampling ice cores to track past earth disturbances
- finds weird, inexplicable traces – far too recent
- multinational team. Hunky Russian and American scientists are there.
- The Russian seems spooky somehow (but will be the good guy)

Better? I hope so. Maybe we haven't yet nailed it, but it's that forward-back process of development that brings the rewards. The only test of whether something works is whether you have a deepening tickle of excitement about it. If that tickle fades, you've gone wrong somewhere. Find out which element isn't working, delete it, and try again. If you're not generating *and scrapping* ideas, you're not doing this right. There has to be a to and fro.

### **Remember to give yourself time!**

If all this takes a week, it's taken you far too little time. Three months would be decent going. If

it takes six months, that's fine too. My most successful novel took two years in development, then was mostly written within two months. Development matters!

### **Technique matters too**

By far the commonest reason why good, passionate amateur writers give up on a project is that they don't have the technical skills needed to complete it. They start out in a rush, then notice that things aren't quite working, don't quite know how to analyse what isn't working, then give up convinced that they don't have the talent.

And that's rubbish. It's a completely untrue conclusion to draw. Writing books is tough, and you have spent no time learning how to do it. If you are feeling stuck, that's almost certainly because of some highly fixable technical issue. The best way to address that is either by [getting editorial feedback](#) (if your project is pretty advanced) or by [taking a course](#) to build the skills you'll need.

# Build Yourself an Awesome Plot

Plotting hasn't changed since Aristotle. Here are the rules:-

**1) The protagonist must have a clear central motivation.** In literary fiction, that can be some fancy-schmancy motivation, like coming to terms with the death of a parent. In commercial fiction, it's got to be a more obviously important goal - like getting married or saving the world. But it has to be clear. It has to be consistent. And it has to matter. If it's not important to the protagonist, it sure as heck won't be to the reader.

**2) The protagonist's goal (which derives from that motivation) has to be determined as early as possible into the novel.** Chapter one for preference. The exact definition of the goal can shift. (Lizzie Bennett first wants to marry Wickham, then D'Arcy. James Bond first wants to locate the missing bomb, then he wants to kill Blofeld). But the basic motivation behind the goal never shifts at all. (True love for Lizzie B, saving the world for Jimmy B)

**3) The jeopardy must increase.** At the outset of a novel, the goal has to matter. By the end, it has to matter more than anything else in the world. James Bond's little problem has become one of world-saving consequence. Lizzie Bennett's generalised desire to make a good match has become an all-consuming passion for one specific man. If the jeopardy doesn't increase, the reader will get quickly bored.

**4) Every scene and every chapter must keep the protagonist off-balance** - things may get better for him/her, or worse, but they need to be constantly changing. If the protagonist is in the same position at the end of the chapter as he/she was at the start, then you need to delete the chapter. No excuses. Another way to think about the same thing is to ask what the dramatic purpose of each and every chapter is. "Setting the scene" is not a dramatic purpose. Nor is "filling in backstory". Change & disequilibrium is the heart of drama. Your story has to move; otherwise it dies.

**5) Don't spend time away from the story.** The reader has bought your book because it has a story. Spend time away from your story and your reader will want to spend time away from your book. If you let more than 300 words go by without touching on your story, then that's too many. Go back and start cutting.

**6) Think about classical structures.** In Campbell's famous analysis of story archetypes, he typically identifies (1) the Invitation - where the hero is asked to take on the challenge, (2) the Refusal - the hero says no, (3) the Acceptance - something happens to change the hero's mind, (4) the Adventure - the hero seeks to master the challenge (5) the Failure - everything comes to a head and it seems like the hero has failed, then (6) the Triumph - just when it all seems too late, the hero pulls off a magnificent triumph. You can't beat 2000 years of storytelling tradition

**7) Control your characters.** Most novels have just one central protagonist - usually the best choice for first time writers. If you do want multiple protagonists then don't go for more than 3, max. And make sure that each one of those 3 stories obeys the 6 rules above. No short cuts, no excuses.

**8) Don't think you're smart.** Commercial fiction follows these rules - just read the James Bond books, for instance. But so do the classics. Read Jane Austen or Dickens or Shakespeare. What's good enough for them is good enough for you. It's smart to follow the rules, not clever to neglect them.



# Check your plot

A good plot has a clear motivation. It has a clear structure. It has an outcome. It has subplots. A good plot looks something like the one below.

<b>Motivation</b>	Lizzie Bennett wants to marry for love
<b>Plot structure</b>	She meets Darcy & Wickham. She dislikes Darcy, and starts to fall for Wickham. Wickham turns out to be a bad guy; Darcy turns out to be a good guy. She now loves Darcy.
<b>Outcome</b>	She marries Darcy
<b>Subplot 1</b>	Jane Bennett (Lizzie's nice sister) loves Bingley. Bingley vanishes. He reappears. They get hitched.
<b>Subplot 2</b>	Lydia Bennett (Lizzie's idiot sister) elopes with Wickham. She's recovered.
<b>Subplot 3</b>	An idiot, Mr Collins, proposes marriage to Lizzie. She says no. Her friend, Charlotte, says yes.

## Things you don't need to worry about when plotting

Note that there's loads of material that the above plot structure *doesn't* tell you. It doesn't tell you where the novel is set (though we think that Regency England could work nicely). It doesn't say anything about plot mechanics - it doesn't tell you *why* Lizzie dislikes Mr Darcy, or *how* Lydia is recovered from her elopement. It has nothing to say about character (apart from maybe X is nice, or Y is an idiot).

And that's fine. Too much extraneous detail about settings, mechanics and character will cloud the overall structure. The simpler you can keep your structure, the better. Note that everything in the plot structure should relate pretty directly to the protagonist's motivation.

## Build your own template

We strongly advise you to build a template much like the one above before you start writing. If you've already started your MS then, for heaven's sake, get to that template right away.

If your template has about as much structural complexity as the one above, then you're doing fine. If you've got loads more complexity, then challenge yourself to pare it down. If you really, really can't reduce your plot to a few bold strokes, then you may well be making a mess of things - take care. If your plot is much less complex than the template above, then again take care. You may well need to complicate matters. That doesn't mean you should add padding - it means you should develop the complexity of your novel..

### **Boys & Girls**

We don't want to be too sexist here, but we do notice that men and women tend to face slightly different challenges. Men tend to be weaker on characterisation and stronger on plotting. When men's plots go wrong, it's often because they fail to keep focus on the protagonist. Remember, boys, it's characters we care about - keep your focus clear!

As for women, the most usual problem is that there's plenty of good character material, but just not enough plot. If your plot is too bare, then you need to fatten it up - and that means adding structure, not just bunging in loads of extraneous new backstory, etc.

### **How to fatten a plot**

If you think that your plot is a little lightweight, then it needs substance added to it. That doesn't need mean more events, more backstory, more points of view, more people yelling at each other. It means add complexity.

For example: let's suppose your story tells a simple tale of a man watching his father die slowly of cancer while coming to terms with their troubled relationship. That sounds good, but there's not enough complexity there to carry a modern novel. So complicate it. One traditional route is mirroring. Give the man a son (or daughter, or both), with whom he also has a complex relationship. That would be a fairly straightforward kind of mirroring.

An alternative would be a sideways kind of mirroring. This bloke is upset about his dad, so he embarks on a ridiculous relationship with a 22 year old Polish nurse, thereby imperilling his marriage.

Yet another way is to ram your novel into some other genre altogether. Put a ghost story in there. Or a whodunit. The key is to add layers, add complexity.

### **Multiple POVs**

If you are telling stories about multiple protagonists, each of whom will occupy a decent chunk of the novel, then you basically need to develop a plot outline - along the lines of the template above - for each and every one of them. The only difference is that you can go in for a tad less complexity in each one. But only a tad. You still need to develop a complete story for every protagonist. Remember to think about how to avoid confusing your story, though. More info [here](#).

### **Exceptions**

Yes, there are always exceptions - but not many. Experimental literary fiction that doesn't obey these rules is very, very hard to publish these days, so experiment at your peril.

The major genre where different rules apply is in crime novels & thrillers. The exceptions are twofold. (1) Detective stories are often driven by the drip-drip-drip of information release rather than plot in a conventional sense, and (2) thrillers (and crime tales) often use multiple POVs, few of whom are protagonists, to move the story forward. That's OK - but do take care to keep a relentless focus on your core story and your protagonist's place in it. There are exceptions to the golden rules - but most people who break them go horribly wrong.

### **Creating scenes**

How to structure a scene or chapter? Well, the best advice we've heard is to "structure the scene like the sex act. That is, foreplay, action, climax, wind down." Since the advice comes from a successful erotic novelist, you can't really argue. More on that [here](#).

### **Check your plot after you've finished the set-up phase**

It's too much to go into here, but we do note that it's very common to write, let's say, 25 or 30,000 words of a 100,000 word novel – then get stuck, write a bit more, realise it's rubbish and give up. That is most likely not because your book is bad, but because you've hit the one-third plot slump. In which case, stop, rethink and [take this excellent advice](#).

# Create an unforgettable character or two

Characterisation - the task of building characters - isn't easy. But if you're struggling to build characters with real life and vigour, just follow these rules. If you do follow them correctly, we can pretty much guarantee that your characterisation will be just fine!

## **Know what kind of character you are writing**

There are roughly two types of protagonist in fiction. One is the everyman or everywoman character, plunged into an extraordinary situation. Harry Potter, for example, comes across as a fairly ordinary boy, albeit that he's a wizard. Likewise, Bella Swan (in *Twilight*) always thought she was ordinary, until she started to fall for this slightly strange guy ...

The second type of character (rather less common, in fact) is the genuinely extraordinary character who would make things happen in an empty room. Bridget Jones is such a character. So too is James Bond or Patrick O'Brien's Captain Aubrey.

Either type of character is fine - don't struggle to equip your ordinary character with a whole lot of amazing skills, or try to 'humanise' your James Bond character by making him nice to old ladies and interested in baking.

## **Empathy is about story and good writing**

Likewise, don't worry too much whether or not your character is likeable. Lisbeth Salander is fairly hostile. Sherlock Holmes is weird. Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* is actually loathsome. *Likeability doesn't matter*. What does matter is that:

A) you write well enough that your reader is drawn in to your protagonist's world, whether they like it or not; and

B) the story you're writing forces that character to encounter big risks and mounting jeopardy. (see more on plotting [here](#) and [here](#)).

If you do those things right, your character will grab and hold the reader's interest.

## **Give your character plenty of inner life**

Novels (unlike films) aren't just about what characters say and do; they're also about what characters think and feel.

So don't forget to go inside your character's head frequently. Even a high-action thriller needs the reader to feel what it's like to be in the burning building / under fire / in the eye of the storm, or whatever. Yes, part of that comes from external descriptions, but much more of it comes from the novelist's ability to disclose inner worlds. [Get more info on inner worlds here.](#)

### **How to know your character inside out and back to front**

*If you haven't yet started your book, then work on the exercise below before you start. If you have started, but think that maybe you started prematurely, then back up, do the exercise and then look back over your existing work.*

Strong characterisation is based on knowledge. The best way to write really strong characters is to know them inside out - at least as well as your best friend, let's say. If you have this knowledge, you will find yourself using it. If you don't have it, you can't. So the problem of *writing* character is essentially a problem of *knowing* character. And the trick to knowing it is to do as follows ...

Begin with a blank sheet (or screen) and begin to write down everything you know about your central character. Don't be too concerned to edit yourself at this stage. Just let rip. It helps to group your comments a bit under certain themes, but if that inhibits your flow then just write and group your notes up later. You should cover all kinds of themes, for example ...

#### **Back Story**

Where did your character come from? What was his childhood like? Happy or sad? What were his relations like with his parents? His brothers / sisters? If his father was (say) extravagant, what impact did this have on your character? if his mother was (say) easily tearful, how did this affect him then? And what about now, in particular where his relations with women are concerned?

Were there key incidents in childhood that shaped in a way relevant to your book's story? Think these through and note them down.

<b>Looks</b>	<p>What does your character look like? You can note down build, hair and eye colour by all means. But don't stop there. Find the distinctive things about your character's physiognomy. Please don't (unless matter is central to your conception) just give your character some obvious distinguishing feature - a scar, a stutter, a wooden leg. Be subtle. Think of an actor who could play your character. How would you describe their face? If you end up with words like 'craggy', 'granite-jawed' etc for a man - or 'classical', 'grey-eyed' for a woman - then that's OK, but stay with the image and try to do better yet. If you need a visual image to work from, then look through magazines until you've got something you can use. Pin it up close to where you work, and work from that. Don't forget to keep your character's look referenced through your novel.</p>
<b>Arc</b>	<p>All your key characters <b>MUST</b> have a well-defined character arc through a novel. This is true even of all-action adventure stories, if you want them to be any good. The standard arc might be something like (1) Susan has a fear of commitment, (2) she encounters a situation in which that fear is put to the test in the most (for her) dramatic and challenging way, (3) she either passes or fails the challenge. Either way, she's different at the end of the book than she was at the start. So put this arc into writing. Link it to the challenges of your story; to their back story; and to their personality. In relation to this central issue, you should aim to understand your character as well as a therapist might. It's critical you get this part right!</p>
<b>Personality</b>	<p>It's usually a good idea to come to this issue a bit later than other things, as your ideas will have more depth and subtlety when some of the structure is already in place. But start to answer as many questions as you can think of. For instance: Does your character laugh easily? Are they sociable? What impression would they make on a casual observer? What about if they spent an hour talking to someone in a bar? Do they get angry easily? Cry easily? Are they</p>

	<p>self-conscious? What political party would they vote for and why? Are they conflict avoiders or conflict seekers? Do they drink, smoke, take drugs, drink too much coffee, eat junk food? If so why? What is it about them that takes them to these places? What are their feelings about sex? Are they screwed up in any way? Are they sensitive or selfish lovers? How involved do they get emotionally?</p>
<b>Relationships</b>	<p>Your central character will almost certainly have a key romantic / sexual relationship in your book. Good. But make sure this relationship is deeply sewn into your study of character arc and action. For example, perhaps your central character seeks to avoid a certain painful truth, and this is the challenge around which your story revolves. In that case, that character's key relationship should perhaps be with a person who challenges him to face up to that truth - or perhaps colludes with him to avoid it. If you handle it like that, then the romantic element in your novel will be as core as everything else. It won't just be thrown in for the sake of it.</p> <p>But don't stop there. Elaborate. Why has your character chosen this particular partner? Is he / she like the partners your character normally goes for? Try and explore their intimate dialogue? Do they go in for cutsie baby-talk? Or hard-edged flippancy? or reflectiveness? What are their pet names for each other? Do they encourage maturity in the other or bring out the less mature side? What are their disagreements about? Do they row, and if so how? How do they mend rows? What does he love most about her? What does she love most about him? What do they most dislike? What is your predicted future for the relationship beyond the end of the novel? If you can get these sort of questions right, you will start to develop real chemistry between your lovers.</p>
<b>Other stuff</b>	<p>And don't just write about all the important things. Write about the unimportant things too. What food does your character like? What clothes do they choose? How do they wear them (ie: sloppily,</p>

stylishly, fussily, self-consciously, etc)? What makes them laugh? What does their laugh sound like? If your character were an animal, what sort of animal would they be? What films do they like? What books? Are they creative? Do they fart? Can they speak French? Are they good with money? Are they absent-minded? Do they like oranges? Have they ever used a gun? What is their favourite pub game? How do they fidget? Describe their hands.

And so on and so on. Many of these questions will have no direct relevance to your book. But the more questions you ask and answer, the better you will know your character.

You should aim to cover at least five pages with this exercise. Don't do it all on one day, as you won't get everything you need in a single go. Give yourself at least 3-4 days for this. Repeat the exercise for your other main characters. Keep your notes available as you start to work on other things, so you can enrich your notes as you go.

The less central a character is to your book, the less you need to know him/her. But don't skimp. If in doubt, do more.

And the exercise *will* work. You will end up with more knowledge than you ever had before, and this knowledge will transmit itself into your writing. Your characterisation will improve. Your characters will grow more life-like. Your book has just got better!



# Dramatise, dramatise, dramatise

You are a novelist: that means you are also a dramatist. Your dramas do not take place on stage or on screen, but they must unfold on the page. As much of your action as possible must unfold in real time, so that the reader is with the character as they say what they say, do what they do and see what they see. (These strictures are often known by the somewhat confusing name of “Show, Don’t Tell” – that is, show the car accident happening, don’t just tell us that it did happen.)

## The Basic Concept

Compare the two following bits of text, the first of them written in telling (that is: non-dramatic) mode; the second of them in showing (dramatic) mode. See which you think is better:

### Non-dramatic action / Telling

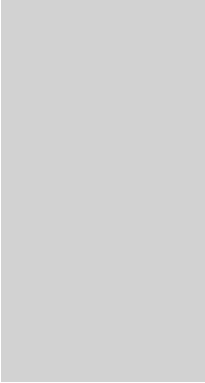
Misha’s boss was a man named Tupolev. He was a short man, hopelessly out of control of the repair yard, and using anger and contradictory instructions to make up for it. Misha did what he could to calm things down and make progress anyway.

### Dramatic action / Showing

The train nosed in then stopped. Men began to uncouple the long chain of carriages.

A short but massive man in a waist-length coat and a flat cap began to bellow instructions in a continual torrent. Half the time, the orders made no sense. The man shouted things like, ‘Lift it up – up – no up, you wet dishcloth – well, down then if it doesn’t go. Down!’ He didn’t make it clear who he was addressing or what he was talking about. His face was bright with anger, and he had a tic in his upper lip. The man giving the orders was Comrade Tupolev and he was Misha’s new boss. It was spring.

Tupolev dealt with some other workers, then approached Misha. ‘Malevich. Those carriages. They’re late. They’re required immediately in the port railway. Immediately! Those carriage bodies



... Well! They're in a rotten state! But, you understand, we have to fix them up. You do. Not that you'd understand. An aristocrat. Anyhow. That's the way it goes. Yes!

'You would like me to take charge of repairing those carriages for immediate return to the port railway,' said Misha, calmly translating his boss's nonsense into logical order. 'Yes, comrade.'

I hope that you can see at once, that the first bit of text *explains* things just fine – but the explanation is lifeless. It's dead.

The second snippet brings the scene to life. You *feel* Tupolev, you sense his living presence on the page. You also *feel* Misha's individuality too. You can sense the kind of man he must be to be shouted at in this way and to respond as calmly as he does.

What makes the difference? It's that the second piece *shows* Tupolev *being* angry, shows him *being* chaotic, shows Misha *being* calm. And that's the heart of the issue. A reader wants to feel physically present at particular places & times. If they do that and see & feel what's happening, they don't need the lecturer's generalisations at all.

### **Check your scenes**

Those basic principles about telling and showing need to be followed through in every scene you ever write. In most fiction, pretty much every chapter is written in real time - shown, not told that is. In good quality commercial fiction, dramatic scenes will dominate. In literary fiction, while the exceptions are more numerous, it is still essential to create the experience of life unrolling moment by moment on the page.

If you think you might have a problem with this issue, then get really disciplined about your response. Check every scene you write. Is it real time (good)? Or reported after the event (bad)? Do you use dialogue (good)? Or just report what happened (bad)? Do you use plenty of physical language to set the scene (good)? Or do you just tell us where it happened in a sentence, then forget about it (bad)?

Also, if you find that your book is shorter than you expected, then it can often be that you're telling too much, and showing too little. As the snippets earlier in this section tell you, showing ain't just better, it's rather longer too.

### **Don't go crazy**

While 'show, don't tell' is an important rule of thumb, you need to keep things in proportion. Every book and every chapter of every book will have some instances of telling. This kind of thing:

*John knew, because Carol had already told him, that Jazz was a in a bad way: upset, impulsive, on the brink of something dark.*

That's a perfectly fine sentence, is it not? The sort of thing you might well find in a successful novel. But that bit – 'because Carol had already told him' – is a classic example of telling, not showing. And that's OK! It's OK, because telling is a neat, simple, fast way to convey information. Showing is slow and dramatic. As you can tell from the John / Carol / Jazz snippet, the dramatic action here is about to concern John and Jazz. That's where the reader wants to spend time – not in some stupid piece of dialogue between John and Carol.

So what 'show, don't tell' really means is this:

- Make sure your novel has plenty of dramatic action
- Make sure that action is shown (ie: dramatised) – unfolded almost real time on the page
- Anything which is not core to the drama of your novel should be conveyed succinctly and in such a way as to move the reader swiftly on to the next important scene. That will involve some telling, and that's absolutely fine.

# Write well

Novels are, you may have noticed, made out of sentences. If your sentences are bad, your novel is bad – and that's true, no matter how amazing your story or your characters or your central concept.

So pay attention to your raw materials. If you can't write competently, your novel will not be taken on. And although writing really well is something well beyond this guide's remit, the golden rules are fairly simple to convey:

## **Cliché**

Cliché is the first enemy of every author. It's so easy to do:

- His eyes were blue enough to swim in.
- She felt a sharp pain, as though cut by a knife
- The breeze whispered softly through the gently waving trees

Prose like this is dull, dull, dull! It's like watching a movie that we've all seen before. It's impossible to make your story & characters seem fresh if you use language that's stale & old.

## **Accuracy**

Also note that clichés are often rubbish. A knife does not in fact cause a sharp pain - it causes a dull one. The colour blue does not indicate something swimmable - a sky is blue but can't be swum in; water, which can be, is seldom blue. Aiming for *accuracy* in your prose is a wonderful way of making sure that you avoid cliché. 'His eyes had the very pale blue of a northern sunrise.' That's still not brilliant, maybe, but it's a lot, lot better than the cliché.

## **Economy**

When you write, you should treat your manuscript as though you had to pay 10p a word for the privilege of writing it. Look at this paragraph:

*He walked slowly away trying not to make any kind of sound. His feelings were in a turmoil, roiling and boiling, a tumult of emotion. He couldn't help reiterating to himself again and again that he had done the right thing; that he had done everything he could. He insisted to himself that she too would surely see this one day.*

Yuk! Wouldn't that go better as simply:

*He crept away, his feelings in turmoil. He had done the right thing, he told himself. One day she would see this too.*

That's 23 words instead of 61 - almost 1/3 the length. And everything about it is better. It doesn't just say it quicker; it says it better. In the first version, all that verbiage just got in the way.

You should also care about even quite small differences. Let's say, for example, that you sometimes say in 12 words what you could equally well say in 9. It would be easy to think that doesn't matter. Three words – who cares? But scale that attitude up to book length. It means that a swift 90,000 word novel has turned into a soggy 120,000 word one. Your bad habits at sentence level can easily kill a book. The only solution is to be tough with yourself about every word you use – and every sentence, paragraph and scene too.

If you've finished your book, then go through and eliminate at least 10% of what's there. That 'at least' means exactly what it says. An experienced novelist might perhaps cut as little as that. Newer writers might well find themselves cutting 30,000 words or more (and perhaps also putting some back as they add other strands and layers.)

### **Attitude**

Good writers work hard at their writing. A bad sentence bothers them and they'll keep going until they get it right. If you don't have that attitude to your work, then it's about time you did. We know one experienced novelist, who also works as a commissioning editor at a major publisher, who revises her work upwards of 40 times before submitting it to her agent. Do likewise!

### **Trust the reader**

Another amateurish trait is that of not trusting the reader. We get a lot of clients who write something rather like the following:

*He rolled in agony. Fire shot through every limb. He felt like screaming out in pain. His entire face was distorted with the grotesque effort of not shouting out.*

That short snippet uses a huge number of very forceful words (agony, fire, screaming, distorted, grotesque). You don't need that many words to do the job. It's as though the writer of this snippet doesn't trust the reader to get the point, so he/she keeps making the same point again

and again like some classic pub bore. Readers will ‘get it’, as long as you write in clear, forceful, non-repetitive language.

### **Double adjectives**

Just to bang away on an increasingly familiar theme, double adjectives are almost always a no-no. The second adjective almost always weakens the first. Compare this:

*He leaned over the black iron railings, the coarse grey cloth of his sleeve catching on the sharp, treacherous spike.*

Just deleting some of the adjectives improves this immediately:

*He leaned over the iron railings, the coarse cloth of his sleeve catching on the sharp spike.*

But you should always let your nouns & verbs do most of the work. A still better version of this sentence would be:

*As he leaned over the railings, his sleeve caught on the spike.*

If you’ve got an adjective habit, then always check back over your work to ensure that you can’t simply cut ‘em. Good writers use adjectives sparingly.

### **Sentence rhythms**

Short sentences are strong. You should certainly use them. But not too much. They irritate quite rapidly. Like a really annoying backbeat. Like this, for example.

Equally, if you go in for longer sentences replete with abstract nouns, then you should vary those too. Prose should ebb and flow, speed up & slow down. Check to make sure that you have both very short sentences and long ones too (20 words plus). If you don’t, it’s quite likely that you’ve slipped into a rather monotonous rhythm.

### **Dialogue**

We talk more about dialogue [here](#), but for now just bear in mind that dialogue should usually speed up your writing. The rhythm will quicken, sentence structures will become choppier and more broken. If you go in for long speeches (4-5 lines or more) all the time, the dialogue will quickly come across as heavy & didactic. If in doubt, speed it up.

## **Touches of genius**

The best authors will occasionally find a phrase that just perfectly captures something: an unexpected word use that shocks the reader into understanding.

*... a quick succession of busy nothings*

*... one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.*

*A blonde to make a bishop kick a hole in a stained glass window*

These are all snippets of genius by writers of genius (respectively Jane Austen, Graham Greene & Raymond Chandler). You can't try to force that kind of stuff into your writing, still less should you try to achieve that on every paragraph or even every page. But a scatter of diamonds here and there has a wondrous effect overall. Go for it, if you can. If you can't, just love it.

## And if you're writing for children

The truth is that there are no particular rules when it comes to writing for children. Everything that we say here applies to pretty much all fiction.

On the other hand, there are some characteristics of nearly all successful kids fiction. Characteristics which suggest that you should:

**Write clearly.** If your style isn't instantly clear, kids won't have the patience to stay with you. If in doubt, keep it simple.

**Write economically.** Same thing here. If you waste words, if a chapter doesn't immediately drive the story forwards, you'll lose readers. Keep it taut.

**Write warmly.** Children flocked to Harry Potter for JK Rowling's ideas and inventiveness, but they stayed with her because of her warmth. Follow her example!

**Write with humour and a bit of mischief.** Kids want humour and they want books to break rules that they wouldn't dream of breaking in real life. Think of your favourite children's books and you'll almost certainly smile.

For some further advice, here are some further tips from kids author (and Writers' Workshop editor) Philip Womack.

### **1. The genre is more crowded than a rush hour tube train.**

Go into any bookshop with a decent children's section and you'll see children's books competing with the weight of the past. You're battling against E Nesbit, Roald Dahl, any of the classics that you remember from your childhood, as well as the latest multi-million selling series (and I don't just mean everyone's favourite wizard boy.) This means that even at submission stage your manuscript really has to stand out. So how can you do this?

### **2. Tick all the boxes ... but don't tick all the boxes.**

This is a tricky one. Your MS must have the recognisable elements of a children's book – depending on the genre, good vs. evil, emotional journey, and so on – but it's how you play with



these elements that makes it stand out. On the face of it Harry Potter is extremely derivative (wizard school, mythology, dark lords and so on) – and yet J K Rowling’s originality and magic lay in how she mixed up all those things. So, effectively, you must tick all the boxes – but I suppose a useful analogy would be to say, *cross* all the boxes instead. Offer the same ingredients in a new form.

### **3. Don’t talk down.**

Children like nothing less than being patronised – something that even children’s editors forget. There is a strange feeling amongst (even grown up) editors that things always need to be explained – ie complex words, or references. But part of the joy of being a child is that you can work it out for yourself. Obviously the *tone* and *style* of your book must be suited to its age group – there’s no point calling a woman “kallipygous” in a book aimed at over eights – but avoid a hectoring, professorial and didactic style. Aim for clarity of expression, anchored in the sensory experience of being a child, and you’re halfway there.

### **4. Be inventive.**

Children like nothing more than strange, silly situations, so play with ideas and characters. Try to be surprising – it’s much more fun for a child if the hero wizard turns out to be a slightly spotty adolescent with asthma.

### **5. Have a plot as hooking as an eagle’s claws.**

I can’t emphasise this enough – remember what it was like to be a child and absolutely, desperately needing to know what happens next. Children are highly attuned to the shape of stories. A lot of them will say things like “why can’t the baddies win sometimes?” as they are so used to seeing the good guys “win” – but really, if they did read a story in which the bad guys won, they wouldn’t be very happy. Your plot needs to be like an eagle’s claws, with the child being an unsuspecting hare that has been swooped upon.

### **6. Write what is true.**

Ultimately, this is the most important point of all. What you write comes from a very deep place inside your mind, rising up through all the layers of adult experience that have accumulated over the years, crushing it down to make a rich layer of oil that you can tap. Don’t be afraid to use your own memories – children find the world a very bewildering place, outside of their known paths, and half the battle about writing a children’s book is making the safe, known world seem

strange and unknown. Children's books, after all, perform two functions – one, as simple entertainment; but two, and more pertinently perhaps, as preparation for the adult world into which we get thrown without ceremony.

## Reached the final stop?

Hemingway once said, "The first draft of anything is shit," and he's right, you know. Nearly all first drafts will have problems, some of them quite profound. And that's OK! A first draft is really just your opportunity to get stuck in on the real business: which is refining and perfecting the story you've just told yourself.

The chances are that you have not properly succeeded in following the rules above, so now is a pretty good time to go back over this guide (plus all the further [advice pages on our website](#) and [blog](#)) and check that you've made full use of their wisdom. You'll find that a lot of these things are circular: you'll use the same advice again and again, but make more profound use of it each time round.

And you WILL find mistakes and weaknesses in your work. That would be true enough even if you were the (literary) love child of Jonathan Franzen and Hilary Mantel. It is most certainly true given that you are not that person. The main business of the Writers' Workshop is reading people's manuscripts and giving [detailed, constructive advice](#). Because we see many hundreds of manuscripts a year, we've got pretty good at recognising the commonest problems.

*Your manuscript probably suffers from one or more of these things.* Most of those things are fixable, so you don't need to worry too much if some of those issues apply to you. The thing is simply to figure out what the issue is, then sit down to address it. Remember that all successful novelists started the same way as you did: with a bad manuscript. The difference between the successes and the failures is, as often as not, little more than hard work and persistence.

That said, our shortlist of the top fifteen commonest mistakes is as follows:

### **1. A terrible concept**

Some concepts just don't work. An 'educational' novel for Young Adults with reams of explanation about climate science stuffed into a creaky plot. A book for adults that features the life history of the author's parrot. None of these books stand any chance of interesting an agent.

*How many manuscripts make this mistake? 1-3%*

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): \*\*\*\*\**

## **2. A book that doesn't ramp it up enough**

Surprisingly, this is something we see a lot. Thrillers that don't quite thrill. Comedies that don't really make you laugh. Romances that aren't actually all that romantic or sexy. You can't be so-so about these things. If agents and editors are faced with a choice between (a) a really thrilling thriller, or (b) one in which someone gets thumped, a bit, two-thirds of the way through, which one do you they'll pick?

*How many manuscripts make this mistake? 5-20%*

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): \*\*\*\**

## **3. A manuscript that's written for a different era**

Peter James, Mark Billingham, Stuart MacBride, Peter Robinson ... these are big selling authors, no? So if you write like them, you'll get sales like them, right? Well, actually no. Those guys wrote for the market as it was when they got started. Unless you do something distinctively new, there is no reason why anyone should favour your book over theirs. Either invent a time machine or write for the world as it is now.

*How many manuscripts make this mistake? 3-5%*

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): \*\*\*\**

## **4. A manuscript with no discernible USP**

Sometimes, a manuscript ticks the boxes. It's a love story with genuine warmth. It feels contemporary. The writing might be fine. But so what? You have to be in the top nought point something percent of that pile to get taken on – and the thing that marks the winners out is usually an angle, a concept, a pitch that's immediately captivating. *Time Traveller's Wife?* I want to read more. A school for wizards? Tell me about it. An Aspergers Swedish computer hacker? Without a strong selling hook, you have seriously disabled yourself in the search for an agent.

*How many manuscripts make this mistake? 20-30%*

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): \*\*\*\**

## **5. Lousy presentation**

Those manuscripts written in purple ink? With awful spelling or weird fonts? And punctuation that forgot to turn up for work? This is less common than folklore would have you believe, but bad presentation is still lethal. Either fix it yourself (better) or [ask us to](#) (if you must).

*How many manuscripts make this mistake? 5-10%*

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): \*\*\**

## **6. Lack of clarity**

If you read the work of John Grisham, Stephen King, Stephenie Meyer, you'll notice that their prose is workmanlike *always*, but seldom good. And that's OK. Those writers have other glories. But you can't be worse than competent. Your meaning *must* be clear. It sounds so simple, but not all manuscripts achieve success.

*How many manuscripts make this mistake? 5-10%*

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): \*\* to \*\*\*\**

## **7. Writing is not economical enough**

Prune ruthlessly, then prune again. If you haven't cut at least 10,000 words from your manuscript, you haven't really tried. Plenty of manuscripts need to lose 30,000 words or more.

*How many manuscripts make this mistake? 10-50%*

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): \* to \*\*\*\**

## **8. Writing is over-the-top**

Strong language is vital, but you need to be careful and moderate with its use. A surprising number of manuscripts just cram it all in on page one ... then carry on cramming.

*How many manuscripts make this mistake? 1-3%*

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): \*\*\**

## **9. Writing is clichéd**

Full on clichés are (thank goodness) relatively rare in the manuscripts we read. But really, a cliché is anything which makes us feel we've read this before ... and, sorry to say, in that broader sense, we see a LOT of excessively clichéd manuscripts.

*How many manuscripts make this mistake? 20-50%*

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): \*\* to \*\*\*\**

## **10. Points of view are mishandled**

We read quite a lot of work where one character is thinking and feeling something ... then all of a sudden we find that we're in the head of some completely different character, sharing their thoughts and emotions. When those transitions aren't correctly handled, you cause giddiness and

confusion in the reader and are likely to cause rejection letters to come a-fluttering down onto your doormat.

*How many manuscripts make this mistake? 3-10%*

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): \*\*\**

### **11. Descriptions absent or bland**

We've read some manuscripts where all the action seems to take place in a white and featureless void. Also novels where any description is bland or muted. Readers want to be transported to a different world – so transport them, OK?

*How many manuscripts make this mistake? 3-10%*

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): \*\**

### **12. Unliterary literary writing**

We get plenty of 'literary' novels that aren't very well written. If your book relies on a wonderful plot or a stunning premise to hook its audience, that might not matter. But if you want your novel to sell as a 'literary' one, it *has* to be well-written. Basic competence is not enough.

*How many manuscripts make this mistake? 10-30% (of literary novels)*

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): \*\*\**

### **13. Um, what happened to the plot?**

Strange but true: some writers complete an entire novel without really knowing what their story is. And stories don't create themselves you know. It's *your* job. (If you do have a plot, but the book still sags, you have committed mistake #7, on economy in writing. Cut and cut again.)

*How many manuscripts make this mistake? 3-10%*

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): \*\*\*\**

### **14. Unbelievable/bland characters**

Sometimes everything seems to be moving along all right in technical terms, yet somehow a manuscript fails to connect with its readers. That's very often because the central character(s) simply aren't really showing up for work, and that in turn is usually because you, the author, don't yet know them sufficiently – almost as though you don't trust your imagination to feel out the limits of the people you're writing about. Needless to say, such books *can't* succeed.

*How many manuscripts make this mistake? 3-10%*

*Howler rating (5 stars is worst): \*\*\**

### **15. You haven't really finished your novel**

Yes, we know: you've reached the final full stop. But when you reach that milestone, you are perhaps, *if you're lucky*, halfway done. Most novels need to be reworked and re-edited and reworked again. That's how they get better – that's why all professional authors work closely with a professional editor, supplied via their publisher. As a newbie, you don't yet have a publisher to offer that vital support and advice – but you can [get the same quality feedback and advice right now and right here from the Writers' Workshop](#). It's what we do! We'll check your manuscript for all these mistakes and many more. We'll explain them so you understand them – and help you fix them. We also run an [awesome self-editing course](#) so that you can develop your own editorial skills.

*How many manuscripts make this mistake? **Hard to say! But agents reject 999 in 1000***

***manuscripts, so arguably 999 people are sending their work out too soon. That seems a bit harsh, though ...***

# Getting help and getting sold

Good authors don't just write well, they do the rest right as well. They get editorial help when they need it; they approach agents the right way.

## Getting help

The Writers' Workshop was founded by writers for writers. Nearly all our editors are published authors – and ones confidently published by big publishers. Many of our editors, indeed, have been short- or longlisted for major awards. Between us we have loads of international book sales, TV and movie deals, bestselling works, and much else. ([Read more about us.](#)) And we can help in pretty much any way you care to name:

**Starting out.** If you're just starting out, try our [Creative Writing Flying Start](#) course, or – if you're feeling more ambitious – one of our [How To Write a Novel](#) courses. (see full course menu [here.](#))

**Learning to self-edit.** One of our very best courses, however, is aimed at those who have either completed a manuscript or are halfway through and getting worried. [Self-editing your novel](#) is a way to teach yourself skills that will last you for the rest of your writing career.

**Getting manuscript feedback.** The gold-standard way to improve a manuscript is to get editorial feedback from a tough, constructive and practical editor. We have offered that kind of manuscript advice to thousands of writers – and our results speak for themselves: [countless writers placed with countless agents](#) – plus international deals, movie sales, bestsellerdom and the rest.

**Get the book.** If this guide has been helpful, then do check out Harry Bingham's truly comprehensive version of the same thing: [How to Write](#). As one reviewer commented, 'Bingham does an amazing job of explaining the ins and outs of novel writing, from using correct grammar and choosing the right point of view to tell your story from, to solving problems that crop up with your plot and creating living, breathing characters ... But the most wonderful thing about this book is how readable it is. His commentary and explanations are brutally honest, but at the same time professional, kind, and humorous.'



## Selling your book

Selling a book is somewhat beyond the remit of this guide (but do make sure you get its sister guide, *How To Get a Literary Agent*). However, the key points can be summarised as follows:

- **You almost certainly need an agent.** Most novelists are still better off publishing traditionally and since publishers mostly only deal with manuscripts that come to them via agents, you need a literary agent to get started.
- **You can find agents on [Agent Hunter](#), our sister site.** The listing is completely comprehensive; it's continually updated; it's easy to search and filter the listings (for example by genre, or by an agent's appetite for new clients); and you can get rich data – including biogs, photos and much else – on every agent.
- **Prepare a submission package.** That typically involves (a) a 50 page / 10,000 word chunk of your manuscript, (b) a covering letter, and (c) a synopsis. You can get a guide to the letter [here](#) and to the synopsis [here](#).
- **Choose about 8 to 10 agents and go for it.** Send your stuff out, either in one wave of submissions or two. Then wait between 2 and 8 weeks.
- **If an agent says Yes...** Then you've followed the advice in this guide. Congratulations and welcome to the world of publishing.
- **If an agent says No...** Then you're almost there, but we'd suggest that you might want to check the paragraphs above and consider what sort of support might be most helpful to you. (Other than whisky, obviously. You're a writer; the whisky comes as standard.)

If you'd like to meet agents – and it's a very good idea to do just that – you can do so at our ever [fabulous Festival or other events](#). We look forward to meeting you there!

---

### The Writers' Workshop

The Studio, Sheep Street, Charlbury OX7 3RR

T: 0345 459 9560

E: [info@writersworkshop.co.uk](mailto:info@writersworkshop.co.uk)

W: [www.WritersWorkshop.co.uk](http://www.WritersWorkshop.co.uk)

### Agent Hunter

E: [info@agenthunter.co.uk](mailto:info@agenthunter.co.uk)

W: [www.AgentHunter.co.uk](http://www.AgentHunter.co.uk)