

Ten Ways to Super-Charge Your Writing Skills

With *bonus chapter* on Self-Publishing!

Let The Writing Coach help you become
the writer you always wanted to be!

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Ten Ways to Improve Your Writing Skills

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This book is a work of non-fiction.

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Helping you become the writer you always wanted to be.

This book is presented as a series of Writer Coaching Sessions. It guides you on improving your writing skills in various areas, and contains sections to help you improve your English grammar, spelling and vocabulary skills.

Over the years, and to my surprise, my website statistics show that among the most-read blogs are those about grammar matters. When I initially wrote these blogs, I was amazed to receive feedback from friends and followers on social media who welcomed the information and asked for more! It highlighted to me the need for helpful, simply explained material on aspects of English grammar.

There's definitely a gap in most people's knowledge of grammar. This has been since the 1970s when English grammar practically ceased to be taught in Australian schools (and in New Zealand schools around the same time).

- The material in the book is fairly evenly divided between:
- Technical aspects of English such as grammar, vocabulary and spelling
- Literary aspects of writing such as pacing and narrative arc
- Resources for writers
- Encouragement to keep writing.

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you—Maya Angelou

ONE



One - Upskill Your Vocabulary

In this coaching session, I offer you some simple ways to improve your writing by upskilling your command of words.

What tools do you need? Only a good book, a dictionary, maybe a thesaurus, and the desire to improve your writing skills.

Read quality writers!

The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go—Dr Seuss (I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!)

One of the best ways to improve language skills is by reading a lot of quality writing. I've often been surprised by writers telling me they have never read a book in their lives. Sometimes they're quite proud of the fact. Someone told me recently he didn't want to read because he might pick up ideas subconsciously and then reproduce them as his own in his writing.

As a lover of reading, whether I'm being transported to another world in a novel, or learning something new from a non-fiction book, it's hard for me to understand that some people simply don't want to read. I was lucky that my parents always encouraged us to read. They read us bedtime stories, took us to the library every week to borrow books, and constantly expounded the virtues of reading: increasing vocabulary, improving spelling and grammar, learning new words by looking them up in the dictionary — another skill — and simply for the joy of reading.

And then there's the benefit that by reading quality writing and literature, you cannot help but improve as a writer yourself. Unlike the writer above who didn't read for fear of plagiarising another's ideas, what happens is you subconsciously pick up correct grammatical structures and spelling and you enrich your vocabulary. Reading is a superbly enjoyable way

of improving your language and writing skills.

I love reading, and I love grammar, but not everyone is a grammar nerd like me. So for those writers, it's infinitely more enjoyable reading a good novel than going back to the grammar books.

If you are a grammar nerd like I am, go to *Four: Get your Grammar Cracking!*

Examples of great writers

When I first wrote this heading, I wondered where to start. But here goes:

Back to the classics

What is classical literature? Encyclopaedia Britannica helps us out here with a nice simple definition:

The term ... classical is ... used for the literature of any language in a period notable for the excellence and enduring quality of its writers' works.

Hence, while we may think of classical literature as referring only to ancient Greek or Roman literature, or centuries-old writing such as Shakespeare's, in fact the term encompasses all great works of literature from any period.

Reading is my favourite occupation, when I have leisure for it and books to read—Anne Brontë (Agnes Grey)

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Where would we be without ...

... a Shakespeare, a Charles Dickens, a D.H. Lawrence, a Jane Austen, a Fyodor Dostoevsky, an Anton Chekhov, a Leo Tolstoy, a Victor Hugo, a Gustave Flaubert, an Alexandre Dumas, a Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a Günter Grass, an F. Scott Fitzgerald, a Louisa May Alcott, a Harper Lee, a Mark Twain, a Katherine Mansfield? Apologies to all the other countries who've produced great authors, but space here is limited! If you'd like me to add anyone to the list to represent your country, then please drop me an email and I'll add them to the next edition!

Indisputably, the world would be a poorer place without these and the thousands of other works by world-renowned classical authors.

We're past the age of heroes and hero kings ... Most of our lives are basically mundane and dull, and it's up to the writer to find ways to make them interesting—John Updike

How do I know which classical writers to choose?

The Penguin Classics Book

If you don't know where to start with reading classical literature, Penguin Books has made it easy to search out authors with their publication by Henry Eliot *The Penguin Classics Book: In Search of the Best Books Ever Written*. According to Penguin's blurb on their website, this tome is 'Stuffed full of stories, author biographies, book summaries and recommendations, and illustrated with thousands of historic Penguin Classic covers ...'

I have to mention that Penguin are retailing it for \$70; The Book Depository for \$48. Penguin mention an e-book, but at the time I checked, none of the retailers listed had stock available and I couldn't find an RRP.

Your local library is your best friend

An alternative is to go to your local library and ask for recommendations from the librarians. In my experience, they're always very knowledgeable and ever-helpful.

If you don't particularly like reading print or digital books, or you are sight-impaired, you can borrow audio books from the library.

Go online!

Google (or other search engines) is the twenty-first century go-to place to research anything. I like to look up quality websites that are likely to be more objective than an individual person's opinion. The BBC lists – rather morbidly perhaps! – the 'Top 100 Books You Need to Read Before You Die' (<https://www.listchallenges.com/bbcs-top-100-books-you-need-to-read-before-you-die>). More cheerfully, they add that it could be considered a literary bucket list. It's an attractive site displaying the book covers as well, with links to Amazon to purchase and Google Search for more information. (No link to Book Depository!)

The mind I love must still have wild places, a tangled orchard where dark damsons drop in the heavy grass, an overgrown little wood, the chance of a snake or two, a pool that nobody's fathomed the depth of, and paths threaded with flowers planted by the mind—Katherine Mansfield

Twenty-first century writers

The BBC also has a say in the best twenty-first century novelists, nominating a list of twelve (<http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20150119-the-21st-centurys-12-best-novels>). I would personally add

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Australia's own Markus Zusak and his novel *The Book Thief*. It's one of the greatest books I've read – and I read a lot!

The website 'List Challenges' publishes their take on the top 100 books of the twenty-first century (<https://www.listchallenges.com/best-books-of-the-21st-century>). I rather like this site because the list was compiled by the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education using lists of bestsellers from Amazon and Goodreads. I also like the other links on this site providing further book suggestions.

They include the slightly sensationalist 'Popular Books that were Once Banned' (<https://www.listchallenges.com/97-banned-books>), the challenging 'Really, Really Difficult Books' (<https://www.listchallenges.com/really-really-difficult-books>), the erudite 'Becoming Well-Read' (<https://www.listchallenges.com/becoming-well-read>), the plain and simple 'Books you've been Meaning to Read' (<https://www.listchallenges.com/books-youve-been-meaning-to-read>) ... and on they go.

Clearly, though, no list can be all-inclusive and there must be subjectivity in the choices put forward regardless of who authors a list. There are bound to be a myriad of other excellent books that are not listed on Goodreads or Amazon (let alone on the BBC list, which only has twelve).

What if I'm not into fiction?

If you're not into fiction, do not despair: there is a wealth of non-fiction material available. It all depends on what subject matter you're interested in: history, geography, art, travel, psychology, self-help, cooking, craft ... your choice is endless.

I'd suggest visiting your local library and searching the library catalogue system using their free computers. If you're not into digital, or the online catalogue seems overwhelming, ask one of the librarians. They're trained to assist you.

What if I don't want to read a book?

If full-length books turn you off, then well-written articles in quality newspapers or magazines will fit the bill. You can either purchase these or again, peruse them at the library or take them out on loan.

Read excellent books about writing

You can't go past Stephen King's *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. There are thousands of books about writing. Check out only the best, including King's, is my advice.

Use a dictionary and a thesaurus

When you're reading one of those great English writers referred to earlier, keep a dictionary and a thesaurus by your side and look up unfamiliar words. Write these words down in your writing journal (if you keep one), or have a page at the end of the manuscript you're working on where you can note down these words. Check back on the words you've recorded every now and then and try to use these new, interesting or evocative words in your writing, without going overboard. Obviously, the word has to fit the context.

While writing, you can also use the 'Thesaurus' feature in Microsoft Word to choose alternative words.

Try to learn at least one new word every day by using your dictionary or thesaurus. This will improve your vocabulary quickly.

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Play word games

It's fun to play games and as adults, we often forget about this traditional way of learning by having fun. At the same time, by playing games we can be connecting with our family and friends instead of watching television. Alternate old favourites like board games Scrabble and Pictionary, crossword puzzles, and word games like Hangman and 'word search', which you can find in the puzzles sections of newspapers and magazines. Balderdash will have you scratching your head with some of the less common words that appear in the game.

Websites

You can also go to websites like the Merriam-Webster 'Word of the Day' (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/word-of-the-day/calendar>). By providing your email address on their site, they will email you the word of the day daily. If your country uses British English, just watch for US spellings.

The first day I looked up the word of the day, it was 'valorous', meaning courageous or heroic. The second time, it was 'obdurate', meaning stubbornly persistent in wrongdoing.

There are many websites that offer a word of the day. Some quality ones include:

- [vocabulary.com \(https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/\)](https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/)
- [dictionary.com \(https://www.dictionary.com/wordoftheday/?utm_source=zapier.com&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=zapier\)](https://www.dictionary.com/wordoftheday/?utm_source=zapier.com&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=zapier)
- [A.Word.A.Day \(http://wordsmith.org/words/eleemosynary.html?utm_source=zapier.com&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=zapier\)](http://wordsmith.org/words/eleemosynary.html?utm_source=zapier.com&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=zapier)

Apps

The internet is a treasure trove of resources for increasing your vocabulary. If apps are your thing, take a look at the article 'The Best Vocabulary Building Apps and Websites' (<https://zapier.com/blog/improve-vocabulary-apps/#learn>) and choose those that best suit your needs.

Use your new vocabulary correctly

A cautionary note: don't use 'big' words merely for their own sake. And when you do use a new word, make sure you use it with the correct meaning. I've often come across new writers whose work, at first glance, seems erudite (learned or scholarly) and sophisticated and who appear to have a good command of the language. But once I start reading the manuscript in depth, it's obvious the writer likes the sound of 'big' words but is using them incorrectly.

If you're unsure of the meaning of any word, use your dictionary: it can be a good old print dictionary, an online dictionary, or Microsoft Word's dictionary feature.

Use clichés and jargon sparingly

Clichés

A cliché is an overused or stereotyped phrase or expression. There are thousands of examples. Often, writers use clichés out of laziness, instead of searching for a fresher alternative. Often, they use them unconsciously because they sound so familiar; they're a part of our culture. Writers may even use clichés because they are comforting; they know that everyone understands the meaning of a clichéd phrase – who doesn't know what 'as deaf as a doorpost' means? Or 'drop-dead gorgeous', 'the apple doesn't fall far from the tree', 'the grass is always greener on the other

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side', 'laughter is the best medicine', 'footloose and fancy free'.

Even as I'm writing these, I can hear you say, 'But what's wrong with them?'

While clichés often express common truths, our aim in writing is to search for the uncommon, the unusual turn of phrase, the word or phrase that will turn a mundane idea into something fresh and sparkling. Sometimes, it's not even necessary to rack our brains for an exciting alternative when a simple, straightforward phrase may suffice (see examples below). Not everyone agrees with limiting clichés, and I've had writers tell me that they like a particular cliché and by darn, they're going to stick with it! Ultimately, the choice is always yours, the writer's, and a few clichés here and there will do no harm. But it pays to know when you're using a cliché, and if your writing is riddled with them, then it's time to redraft!

One place where you can use clichés to good effect is with characterisation. You may want to pepper the speech of one of your characters to portray the type of person he or she is. The sky's the limit! You can go to town!

Examples of fresh phrases in place of clichés

In the following examples the clichéd phrase and the suggested alternative are given in italics.

After following the agent back to his house, he decided to *call it a day* and return home.

After following the agent back to his house, he decided to *end his surveillance* and return home.

After a while the lights went out and he decided to *call it a night*.

After a while the lights went out and he decided to *turn in for the night*.

She looked as though she might burst into tears at the *drop of a hat*.

She looked as though she might burst into tears *at any moment*.

Jargon and acronyms

According to the Macquarie Dictionary, jargon is 1. the language peculiar to a trade, profession, or other group; 2. pretentious language characterised by the use of uncommon or unfamiliar words; 3. unintelligible or meaningless talk or writing; gibberish.

Acronyms are words formed from the initial letters of a sequence of words, for example, ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps).

If you're at a social event and a doctor starts having a conversation with you, a lay person, using a lot of medical terms, you're not likely to understand what she's talking about.

Nevertheless, when that same doctor is in her surgery performing a medical procedure, then it's entirely appropriate for her to use medical terms.

Jargon is language used within a particular context or speciality area. While it helps experts in that speciality area communicate with ease, it may be meaningless to or not widely understood by others and at worst, it can exclude outsiders. Examples abound in most speciality areas:

'AWOL' (an acronym for absent without leave – the military)

'tachycardia' (accelerated heart rate – medicine)

'due diligence' (steps taken to avoid committing an offence; a comprehensive appraisal of a business by a prospective buyer – law)

'DNS' (an acronym for domain name system – technology)

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‘driver’ (influential factor – science).

Some terms have become widely used outside of their specialty area. In that case, it can be argued that they’re no longer considered jargon because everyone understands them – they have become inclusive. Examples are ‘suspect’ or ‘perp’ (police jargon for a person who may have committed a crime), ‘POTUS’ (political jargon for president of the United States), FAQ (internet jargon for frequently asked questions).

I think it’s important to note the use of the word ‘pretentious’ in the definition of jargon above. If you use a lot of jargon in your writing, then pretentious is how it is going to appear to your readers.

The ultimate aim of writing is to communicate. If you’re using too much jargon, then you’re not going to communicate effectively with a broad readership.

As with clichés, jargon can be very useful in character portrayal. You may have a character who is a lawyer, for example, and have that character constantly using legalese (legal jargon) in his speech, even when he’s not in the courtroom, as a means of showing his supposed superiority over other characters.

Jargon used well can add colour and authenticity to the writing in a book or a scene that concerns a specialist field – as long as you make the meanings clear when you first use the jargon. For example, if you’re writing a novel or a non-fiction book involving the military, it will add interest and vibrancy to have a US soldier refer to the Pentagon as ‘the five-sided puzzle palace’, and describe the ribbons worn on the breast of a dress uniform as ‘fruit salad’, or a UK soldier to call a colleague a ‘five plonks’, a retard.

Let’s wrap this up ...

We’ve covered several ways to improve your vocabulary, by:

- reading quality literature

- using a dictionary and a thesaurus
- playing word games
- using online resources
- limiting clichés and jargon.

Credits and resources

Duignan, B., et al, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/art/classical-literature> Accessed 5 February 2019.

Macquarie Dictionary (online), Macmillan Publishers Australia, 2019. <https://www.macquariedictionary.com.au/>

TWO



Two - Understanding English Sentence Structure

There are five basic sentence structures in English. This Writer Coaching Session shows you an easy way to improve your English writing skills by using topic sentences, supporting sentences and a conclusion, and learning how to connect paragraphs.

Five basic sentence structures

There are five basic sentence structures in English:

- **Subject – Verb** (Leanne runs; She is running)
- **Subject – Verb – Object** (Maryanne grows vegetables)
- **Subject – Verb – Adjective** (Flowers are pretty)
- **Subject – Verb – Adverb** (She runs fast)
- **Subject – Verb – Noun** (You are doctors)

Learning to expand on basic sentence structures

Using the above sentences, here are some simple suggestions on how you could expand them so they are more informative and interesting.

Leanne, my sister, runs to the shops every morning. She is running for exercise and also to pick up the morning newspapers.

Maryanne grows mainly root vegetables like potatoes, ginger and carrots in her large back garden.

Nasturtium flowers are not only pretty, they are also

1 I'm referring to Australian schools here.

edible.

She runs so fast that she overtakes cyclists.

You are doctors specialising in cardiovascular disease.

Learn how to organise your writing

I realise this is really going back to the basics, but many people seem to struggle with the basics since our schools¹ practically stopped teaching English grammar in the 1970s.

Good writing is not about the number of words, or sentences, or paragraphs, or pages you can pack into your manuscript. Good writing is how all your sentences 'work' together; it's about the coherence of ideas between your sentences and how well you connect the sentences.

You can apply the ideas below to any type of writing, fiction or nonfiction.

Don't worry – an example follows the suggestions below!

1. First, what is your main idea or topic for the particular chapter/article you're writing?
2. Write your topic sentence in the opening paragraph.
 - The topic sentence explains the subject you are going to write about.
 - It tells the reader the most important idea you want to convey.
 - The opening paragraph may be just your

Two - Understanding English Sentence Structure

topic sentence, or it may contain supporting sentences.

3. Next, write your supporting sentences and paragraphs.
 - Supporting sentences/paragraphs give more information about your topic.
 - Make sure each supporting sentence/paragraph contains information related to your topic sentence.
 - Ensure you sequence your supporting sentences/paragraphs logically or chronologically.
4. Make sure you connect paragraphs so that the narrative is fluid.
 - Your ideas need to flow satisfyingly from one paragraph to the next.
5. Finish with a conclusion.
 - Whether you are finishing a scholarly article, a blog or a book chapter, you now need to summarise the idea you have developed throughout the various paragraphs.

Here's the example you've been waiting for!

My topic is GARDENING – and I'm not in any way, shape or form an expert on this subject. If I were to publish this brief article (which I won't be), my aim would be to offer, from my own experience, some tips to other beginner gardeners.

However, my chief aim is to show you how to organise a piece of writing logically so that the topic is clear from the outset, the ideas flow seamlessly through the paragraphs that follow, and the conclusion wraps up

everything that's gone before it. It may be useful for you to organise your paragraphs by using bullet points, as I've done below. So you can see my logic as I was planning and writing, I've included some comments in red font and square brackets [xxx] in the appropriate places. Below are just the bare bones of the article. An example of the full article follows this.

1. My topic sentence/paragraph:

- Are you a beginner gardener? Then this article is meant just for you...

2. My supporting sentences/paragraphs.

- Whether you're a balcony gardener or you have a large back yard...
- [chronological order – most important step first] The first thing you need is good-quality soil...
- If you're lucky and your garden already contains healthy, good-quality soil, then lucky you!
- If you need to build up your soil quality, go to your local landscaper instead of a garden centre. Why? ...
- Start composting. [the following sentence continues the theme in the preceding paragraphs of needing rich soil] You can enrich your soil further by using homemade compost...
- You don't need an expensive composter but you do need to know how to do it properly...
- Your organic matter needs to break down before you can use it...
- The internet is a source of endless information...
- [the next sentence also continues the theme of the importance of rich soil] Starting a worm farm is yet another way to enrich your soil...

Two - Understanding English Sentence Structure

- Worm castings – basically, their poo – and the juice they create by breaking down organic matter...
 - Worms can break down almost anything, although there are things they definitely do not like or thrive on...
 - The organic matter you feed the worms needs to be broken down before...
 - Again, search the internet...
 - [The following three paragraphs are the next thing a beginner gardener will find helpful] Learn about gardening. Join a gardeners' club...
 - Watch gardening shows...
 - Use Google...
 - Water and fertilise.
3. And now for the *conclusion*.
- [This reminds readers of what's been covered above as the most important aspect of starting a garden – rich soil] When your soil is up to scratch...
 - [This sentence tells the reader what to do next] You'll need to water and fertilise your plants regularly...
 - [the conclusion is a good place to include a final, brief but important suggestion] One more thing: you'll probably find...
 - Happy gardening!

Before publishing it, I would set the article out with headings. Headings break down passages of text, add 'white space' to give the reader a breather, and

generally make a piece of writing easier to read. You'll notice I've also added a few refinements. See the result below:

GARDENING FOR BEGINNERS

Are you a beginner gardener? Then this article is meant just for you so that you can start creating your own vegetable and flower patch.

Whether you're a balcony gardener or you have a large back yard, you can apply the ideas below to create your garden.

IT ALL BEGINS WITH THE SOIL

The first thing you need is good-quality soil. Good soil ensures your plants will thrive, and healthy soil helps keep disease and pests at bay.

If you're lucky and your garden already contains healthy, good-quality soil, then lucky you! You can start planting now! Nevertheless, if you aren't already composting and you don't have a worm farm, check out the suggestions below.

If, like I had to, you need to build up your soil quality, I suggest going to your local landscaper to buy soil rather than buying it at a garden centre. Why? I've always found the soil to be richer than the one they sell at garden centres. You can buy small quantities by the bag, or by the cubic metre. They will always deliver for a relatively small fee.

START COMPOSTING

You can enrich your soil further by using homemade compost. Start composting your kitchen plant-based waste. You will be surprised at just what you can compost: vegetable and fruit scraps, eggshells, human hair, cardboard and paper (watch those with toxic inks though) – and much more. And it's so satisfying knowing that instead of creating more waste for our overtaxed environment, you're returning rich nutrients to your garden.

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You don't need an expensive composter but you do need to know how to do it properly so that it doesn't smell or attract rodents and other pests. It's easy – believe me, I knew nothing about it when I started, but I soon nailed it!

Your organic matter needs to break down before you can use it. So the idea is, once it's broken down, mix it into your garden soil before planting a crop. You can dig a compost trench, but the organic matter still needs to break down before it's available to the plants.

The internet is a source of endless information, so get started by searching online for how to go about composting and what you can and should not compost.

START A WORM FARM

Starting a worm farm is yet another way to enrich your soil. Please don't be put off by the word 'farm'. Believe me, you don't need acreage! I started with a large, oblong, black, plastic container and I bought about 1,000 'red wiggler' worms from someone on Gumtree (an online marketplace in Australia) for about \$20. He had started them off and fed them on horse poo as well as organic matter, so all I had to do was put them in the container, add my organic matter and then cover them with liberal layers of newspaper and cardboard to keep them cool in the summer and warm in the winter. They need to be kept in a sheltered place, especially in Queensland to avoid getting waterlogged in our tropical downpours.

Worm castings – basically, their poo – and the juice they create by breaking down organic matter (including fruits, vegetables, grains, coffee grounds, dead flowers, eggshells (but not eggs), newspapers and cardboard) are gold for your garden.

Worms can break down almost anything, although there are things they definitely do not like or thrive on: don't feed them processed foods, dairy foods, meats, onion and garlic, spicy foods, pesticides, citrus fruit, glossy paper or paper with coloured inks, poisonous plants.

The organic matter you feed the worms needs to be broken down before you can use the castings and juice on your garden.

Again, use the internet to search for how to set up your own worm farm.

LEARN ABOUT GARDENING

Join a gardening club

I joined The Diggers Club as I liked the idea of buying heirloom seeds and I wanted to learn about gardening in a hurry.

Watch gardening shows

I became a fan of one of the gardening shows here, Gardening Australia, which always seems to provide helpful tips for beginner gardeners. It's always advisable to stick to information relevant to your country or state's environment so that you're learning about optimal planting and harvesting times for your climate.

Google it!

You can find anything on Google! When I'm going to plant a particular crop, I'll search for companion plants. When my crop has done its thing and gone to seed, I Google how to harvest the seed – believe me, as a beginner it isn't always obvious to me where the seeds are produced! If I'm being harried by a pest, I Google how to deal with it in an environmentally friendly way.

Remember to feed your babies!

You'll need to water and fertilise your plants regularly to ensure a healthy and abundant harvest.

GET STARTED!

When your soil is up to scratch, and you're armed with the right information about what to plant and when, there's nothing stopping you from beginning to plant

Two - Understanding English Sentence Structure

your crops and flowers.

One more thing: you'll probably find yourself seemingly outwitted by creatures great and small helping themselves to the tasty new shoots and fruits of your labour before it's ready to harvest. When responding to these challenges, always choose natural methods over resorting to harmful, toxic pesticides. I use garlic spray, garden nets, diatomaceous earth, enviro-friendly slug pellets, and other creative methods to deter the creatures wishing to share in my bounty.

Happy gardening!

Write an outline

When you're writing a book, chapter, article or blog, writing an outline first is another helpful way to organise your ideas.

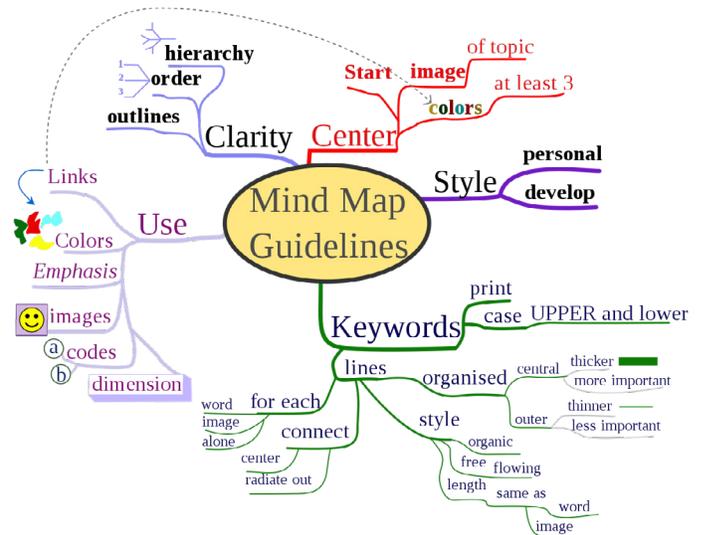
Dot points

As in the Gardening article example above, you can organise your thoughts by using dot points or bullet points. You can write down ideas randomly in bullet point form, and when you're using Microsoft Word or another word processing program, then it's easy to rearrange and reorder them logically by cutting and pasting.

Mind-mapping

A mind map is a diagram used to visually organise information. A mind map is hierarchical and shows relationships among pieces of the whole. It is often created around a single concept, drawn as an image in the center of a blank page, to which associated representations of ideas such as images, words and parts of words are added. Major ideas are connected directly to the central concept, and other ideas branch out from those major ideas (Wikipedia).²

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind_map Accessed 4/1/19



Mind mapping is great for people who prefer to plan their writing visually rather than with text. I once used this method to tutor a nine-year-old student who was having trouble writing essays at school.

She just didn't know where to start. I first suggested starting with a structure (see heading below 'Start with a structure'), but it didn't work for her. Once I showed her mind mapping, she was able to write down just a few words on each branch of the map and expand ideas out from there. After that, we practised converting the plan into an essay and eventually, she built up her confidence and was able to dispense with the mind map entirely.

Start with a structure

If you do like working with text rather than using a mind map, then a fail-proof way is to start with a structure – a table of contents if you will.

Let's use the Gardening topic as our example again.

I would start like this:

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The title is Gardening for Beginners.

1. The soil
2. Composting
3. Worm farms
4. Learning
 - a. Gardening clubs
 - b. Gardening shows
 - c. The internet
5. Conclusion
 - a. Start
 - b. Water and fertilise
 - c. Pest control

And there's more...

There is an abundance of English language and grammar websites that you can consult. Check out *Three: Get Online!*

Credits and resources

Mary Milne, Tips on How to Improve English Writing Skills. (15/06/2017. Last modified 24/10/2018). <https://www.wallstreetenglish.com/blog/how-to-improve-english-writing-skills/> Accessed 4/1/19.

THREE



Three - Get Online

This session guides you to a variety of online resources where you will find helpful information for improving your English language skills.

There are many English language and grammar websites you can consult. My aim is to provide you with the cream of the crop. Many of these online resources are aimed at non-native speakers of English. That doesn't matter; in fact, it can be an advantage. Resources for teaching English as a second language don't assume any prior grammatical knowledge, and when we've forgotten or were never taught English grammar at school, we need to go back to basics.

Some websites offer plenty of free information. Others have paid courses if you want to delve deeper. That's entirely up to you. You can do that, or combine online learning with a quality English grammar book.

Copy and paste links

I suggest that you copy the links you want to follow and paste them into the address bar of your browser.

Basic English Sentence Structure

This website discusses basic English sentence structure:

- <https://www.wordy.com/writers-workshop/basic-english-sentence-structure/>

The 11 Best Websites

This website gives links to what they consider the Eleven Best Websites to Improve Writing Skills in English:

- <https://www.shoutmeloud.com/best-websites-improve-english-writing.html>

Quiz yourself

There are hundreds of quizzes available online to test your knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, spelling, punctuation ...

Here is a selection:

Vocabulary

- Merriam-Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/word-games/vocabulary-quiz>
- Oxford: <https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/english-level-test/vocabulary>
- Cambridge: <http://www.cambridge.org/elt/inuse/VocabTests/evu-upperprint-test.htm>

Grammar

- International English Language Testing System (IELTS): https://www.examenglish.com/IELTS/ielts_grammar_test.htm
- English Grammar Quizzes ESL, EFL (you can choose various levels): <http://a4esl.org/a/g5.html>
- English Club: <https://www.englishclub.com/esl-quizzes/grammar/>

Spelling

- Merriam-Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/word-games/difficult-spelling-words>
- English Zone: <http://www.english-zone.com/spelling/adv-sp1.html>
- How to Spell: <https://howtospell.co.uk/quizone.php>

Three - Get Online

Punctuation

- BBC: https://www.grammarbook.com/grammar_quiz/effective_writing_1.asp
- Bristol University Faculty of Arts: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_55.htm
- Northern Illinois University: <https://www.niu.edu/writingtutorial/punctuation/quizzes/PunctuationSelfTest.htm>

Grammar and punctuation

- The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/quiz/2013/feb/04/grammar-punctuation-quiz-test>

Test your level of English

- Wall Street English (the quiz is at the end of their blog): <https://www.wallstreetenglish.com/blog/how-to-improve-english-writing-skills/>

Subscribe to a website with quality grammar content

- A great website to check out is ‘Grammar Girl’ Mignon Fogarty’s Quick and Dirty Tips. Click here: <https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl>
- Mignon is an award-winning podcaster and writer. Her website contains free grammar exercises at all levels of proficiency, blogs explaining aspects of grammar, articles giving writing tips, and some free downloads—here: <https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/freebies>.

Use an app to improve your English

Many apps are designed for non-native speakers. However, below are two apps that are aimed at both native and non-native English speakers:

- Practice* English Grammar from Cleverlize – available on both iOS and Android – the core app is free, but to access every module you need to pay for individual modules or subscribe. (*It’s interesting that they spell the verb this way. In British/NZ/Australian English, the verb is spelt with an ‘s’ – practise – and the noun with a ‘c’ – practice.)
- LearnEnglish Grammar from the British Council – available on both iOS and Android. Again, the basic app is free but you pay for more advanced lessons. LearnEnglish Grammar has a British English and a US English version.

The cost of these apps seems very reasonable.

A free alternative on Android is Maxlogic’s English Grammar Ultimate.

Credits and resources

For the information on apps: Kit Eaton, The New York Times, App Smart: English Grammar Aids for Both Native Speakers and Students, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/29/technology/personaltech/video-feature-english-grammar-aids-for-both-native-speakers-and-students.html> Accessed 23 Jan 2019.

It’s a good idea to do a Google search for ‘English grammar apps’ periodically for any new software that comes on the market.

FOUR



Four - Get Your Grammar Cracking

To inspire you with a subject that may not be popular with everyone but that is necessary to come to grips with as a writer, this session gives:

- Some anecdotal experience
- Useful suggestions and links for buying quality books on English grammar (these do not have to be expensive)
- Examples of some common grammatical errors I find in the manuscripts of many writers I work with. This is useful, because they're likely to be the same types of mistakes most writers make.

Get back to grammar!

The basics

In the 1970s and 1980s when I lived in Spain, I prepared myself for teaching English as a second language by undertaking a crash course in English grammar. I did this by studying grammar books.

Working as a private English teacher at the time, I needed neither a teaching degree nor a qualification for teaching English as a second language (TESOL). However, I did need to be able to readily answer my students' questions about the intricacies of the language. Refreshing my grammar knowledge was the solution.

I went on to gain qualifications in both English and Spanish through Escuela Oficial de Idiomas Madrid, but insofar as English was concerned, my own studies were far more useful. When we returned home, I gained an MA in English and Spanish language, literature and linguistics.

While teaching was not my passion, that period of going back to basics with English grammar has stood me in good stead all my professional life, enabling me to help explain to writers why a particular construction is incorrect rather than just intuitively knowing it is not

correct, and conversely, why something seemingly contradictory is in fact correct. It also made me a pedantic mother when my daughter was growing up. 'That's a run-on sentence, darling...' She spent many years exercising her forehead and eyebrows at me whenever I launched into a grammatical explanation, but we often have a laugh now because she sometimes corrects me!

The Great Vowel Shift

English grammar can be a bit of a maze, so don't get disheartened. There are as many exceptions to rules as there are rules in English grammar. I'll just throw in the term 'The Great Vowel Shift'. You may have heard of it.

Way back when, in merry/merrie old England between about 1350 and the 1700s, all Middle English long vowels changed their pronunciation. English spelling, which had been a jolly old anarchic mix, began standardising in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Geoffrey Chaucer of *The Canterbury Tales* fame was seven years old when this change began. Shakespeare (1564—1616), lived through the final years of the changing nature of English pronunciation.

The Great Vowel Shift is largely responsible – let's call it the culprit – for English words being spelt differently from how they are pronounced.

No wonder that even as native speakers, we struggle with spelling.

My advice is, do the best you can and think that every new thing you learn is one more thing you didn't know before.

Four - Get Your Grammar Cracking



Some common grammatical errors

Run-on sentences

To illustrate the example in the anecdote above, a run-on sentence is one that contains two complete sentences, often joined by a comma, when they should be two separate sentences. A complete sentence contains, as a minimum, a **subject** and a **verb**. (The example below contains more than just a subject and a verb, but these are the only elements we need be concerned with here.)

I **would like** all the committee to be advised on how committee members vote, if **they** do not 'reply to all'

there is no way to verify voting.

The first complete sentence begins with: 'I would like.'
'I' = **subject** 'would like' = **verb**

The second complete sentence begins with: 'If they do not reply.' – 'they' = **subject**, 'reply' = **verb**

Read the above example aloud, and you'll notice that it needs to be rewritten as two standalone sentences:

I would like all the committee to be advised on how committee members vote. If they do not 'reply to all', there is no way to verify voting.

Unnecessary capitalisation

Capitalisation means using an initial capital letter in a word. You'll also hear it referred to as 'upper case'. Small letters are referred to as 'lower case'.

Over the past 11 years, I may have had only one manuscript cross my desk that did not use capitalisation unnecessarily. That makes this section on where you do and don't need to capitalise words relevant to most writers.

In the interests of simplicity, I give below the most common situations in English where words need to be capitalised. If you would like a full discussion on capitalisation, please refer to the *Style Manual* (reference in *Credits and Resources* at end of chapter).

Also, in our wonderful language, there are always exceptions to rules! So if in doubt, check your dictionary, or style book, or ask me!

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Starting a sentence

The first word in a sentence needs a capital letter.

Example: Life in Spain during the Spanish Civil War was fraught with danger.

The pronoun 'I'

Unlike other pronouns (we, you, they, he, she), I is always capitalised regardless of its location in a sentence.

Example: When I landed my dream job, I was really excited.

Proper nouns

From the mid-1500s in England, 'important' common (vs proper) nouns began to be capitalised along with proper nouns. This practice continued for about three centuries, until the nineteenth century. However, I see the influence of that period creep into writers' manuscripts even today!

First, what is a noun? A noun is a word that names people, places, animals, things, ideas, to name a few. What is a proper noun? A proper noun refers to a specific place or person or entity.

Example: the River Thames, vs 'the river'.

Some common proper nouns

Personal names

Examples: Priscilla, John, Roberta, Harry, Jemima Smith, Antony Burgess

Place names

Examples: London, Rome, the Roman Forum, Bridge of Sighs, the Atlantic Ocean, Carnaby Street

Other common places to use a capital letter are:

Titles

Aunty Joan, Uncle Willy, Grandma Jess, the Dalai Lama, Sir Peter Cosgrove Governor-General of Australia, Doctor Adams, Mrs Wilberforce, Mr Rudd

Direct address

Mum, Dad, 'Yes, Your Honour', 'May I introduce Sir Percival Gatling, Prime Minister of Zog'

Nationalities and distinct groups of people

British, Spanish, Asian, Buddhist, South Australian

Names of organisations

Columbia University, the Italian Parliament, British Broadcasting Corporation

Books, newspapers and songs

The Book Thief by Marcus Zusak, the Gold Coast Bulletin, Yellow Submarine by the Beatles

From the examples above, note that you do not use a capital letter in the following:

My mum is a massage therapist. (Reason: This is no longer a direct term of address.)

The governor-general is a distinguished man. (Reason: When referring to someone with a title in general terms, not along with their name, the title is no longer capitalised. Surprise – there are exceptions!)

The doctor is coming to see Penny this afternoon. (Reason: The word 'doctor' is used generically, without including his or her name.)

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Misspellings

Homophones

Words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings are called homophones: 'phone' = sound, 'homo' = same.

Here are a few:

it's and its

its is a possessive pronoun used with animals, inanimate objects, etc.

Example: The dog ate its breakfast. The mountain cast its shadow over the village.

The other possessive pronouns are my, your, his, her, our, their (my jacket, your book, his house, her daughter, our family, their neighbours)

it's is a contraction – a shortened form – of it is. The apostrophe stands in for the missing letter.

Example: It's 2.30 already and I haven't even had lunch.

there/their/they're

there is an adverb of place. It shows where something is.

Example: 'I put it over there,' he said, pointing to the fireplace.

their is a possessive adjective, third person plural (relating to 'they').

Example: John, Mary and Philippa hung their coats on the rack to dry.

they're is a contraction – a shortened form of they are. The apostrophe replaces the letter 'a' in 'are'.

Example: They're going to miss the bus if they don't hurry.

theirs and there's

theirs is a possessive pronoun, third person plural (relating to 'they').

Example: Theirs (referring to 'their coats') are drying on the rack.

there's is a contraction – a shortened form of there is.

Example: There's a cat sitting on your books.

your and you're

your is a possessive adjective, second person singular and plural (relating to 'you').

Example: Your cat is sitting on her books.

You're is a contraction – a shortened form of you are

Example: If you keep looking at him like that, you're going to end up with a black eye.

to/two/too

to is a preposition used before an infinitive or to begin a prepositional phrase.

Example: I'm going to explain [infinitive] when we get to the gym [prepositional phrase].

two is a number

Example: Please give me two kilos of peaches.

too is an adverb meaning extremely or also

Example: In Queensland's summer, it can be too hot to go outside between 8 am and 4 pm.

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You like coconut yoghurt and I do too.

his and he's (not quite homophones but people mix them up)

his is a possessive adjective and possessive pronoun

Example: He can take his mother [possessive adjective] home now, but that's not his [possessive pronoun] jacket.

he's is a contraction – shortened form of he is

Example: He's leaving for the airport soon.

Using the possessive incorrectly

How many times do you see in shop windows or in advertisements phrases like:

'Banana's 99c kg!'

'Vegie's only \$10!'

'No dog's permitted on the grass!'

In each of the above, the possessive – 's – has been used instead of the plural. The correct forms are:

'Bananas 99c kg!'

'Vegies only \$10!'

'No dogs permitted on the grass!'

The possessive is only used to indicate ownership, belonging or possession of someone or something. Examples:

The dog's bone – the bone belongs to the dog.

Mary and John's house – the house is owned by Mary and John (although slightly awkward, it is also okay to say Mary's and John's house).

The girls' books – the books belong to the girls.

The men's golf clubs – the golf clubs belong to the men.

Would of/should of

No! Please! These should always be **would have** and **should have**.

The confusion arises from the contractions – shortened forms – would've and should've. In these contractions, the apostrophe is standing in for two letters, the 'h' and the 'a' of **have**. The ending of these two words sounds very similar to 'of', so people incorrectly assume the full forms are 'would of' and 'should of' instead of the correct **would have** and **should have**.

Fewer and less

Fewer is used with countable nouns – things you can count individually.

Less is used with uncountable nouns like water or salt – you can count litres of water and grains of salt, but you can't count water or salt individually.

When to use **fewer**. When you can count the thing you're writing about, use **fewer**. Examples:

There are fewer cakes left in the bakery than yesterday.

Fewer people go to the cinema than they did 20 years ago.

When to use **less**. When the thing you're describing

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can't be counted, use **less**.

This salt grinder has less salt than that one.

I drink less coffee than you do.

Exercises using fewer and less

See *Credits and resources* below.

Dangling modifiers

What is a dangling modifier?

Let's break down the term. A modifier is a word, phrase or clause that modifies – that is, it adds more information to – a noun, verb or adjective in a sentence. Modifiers can be adjectives, adverbs, adjectival phrases, adverbial phrases, adjectival clauses, or adverbial clauses.

When a modifier is 'dangling', or 'misplaced', it means it is modifying an incorrect part of the sentence, so the sentence needs to be rewritten in order to untangle the meaning. The general rule is to use the modifier as close to the part of the sentence it is modifying as possible.

It may sound complicated, but it's not really. By reading the sentence aloud, you'll pick up that it doesn't sound right. Look at the examples below and you'll see what I mean.

Incorrect: I saw a dead dog driving down the highway.

Correct: Driving down the highway, I saw a dead dog.

Incorrect: Emitting thick black smoke from the midsection, I realized something was wrong.

Correct: I realised something was wrong when my car began emitting thick black smoke from the midsection.

Incorrect: The girl was consoled by the nurse who had

just taken an overdose of sleeping pills.

Correct: The nurse consoled the girl who had just taken an overdose of sleeping pills.

Incorrect: Mrs Daniel sews evening gowns just for special customers with sequins stitched on them.

Correct: Mrs Daniel sews evening gowns with sequins stitched on them just for special customers.

Incorrect: She carefully studied the Picasso hanging in the art gallery with her friend.

Correct: With her friend, she carefully studied the Picasso hanging in the art gallery.

Incorrect: Freshly painted, Jim left the room to dry.

Correct: Having freshly painted the room, Jim left it to dry.

(Credit for above examples to Houston Community College – see *Credits and resources* below.)

Also, have a look at the blog on dangling modifiers on my website – see *Credits and resources* below.



Quality grammar books

Invest in a quality grammar, such as one published by Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press or the BBC. There are plenty of grammars out there and some will be better than others.

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Unless you're totally into grammar and want to make a serious study of it, just purchase a basic grammar – that's the level most native English speakers have forgotten. We often intuitively know when something sounds right or wrong, but we don't know why, and it's useful to confirm that we are using language correctly.

Many grammars now come with a CD-ROM as well. The Book Depository is a great resource for purchasing books, as they offer discounted prices and free shipping. A quick check on Book Depository in November 2018 revealed a wide range of prices depending on the grammar selected (all prices AUD).

Oxford Everyday Grammar—240 pages—\$16.37

The mammoth 984-page *Cambridge Grammar of English*, including CD-ROM—\$72.40

English Grammar Essentials for Dummies—192 pages—\$12.13

<https://www.bookdepository.com/>

See Credits and resources below for details of these books.

Let's wrap this up ...

In this session, we've discussed:

- Going back to the basics with grammar
- What the Great Vowel Shift means
- Seven of the most common grammatical errors people make in writing
- Grammar books and resources.

Credits and resources

Countable nouns and dangling modifiers

Tagarro, G., editors4you, Countable Nouns,

Uncountable Nouns and Dangling Modifiers, 2013, <https://editors4you.com.au/countable-nouns-uncountable-nouns-dangling-modifiers/>

Dangling modifiers

Houston Community College, HCC Learning Web, 2016, <http://learning.hccs.edu/faculty/abigail.estillore/engl1301/grammar-etc/the-best-of-dangling-modifiers>

English grammar and exercises

My English Pages: Learn English Grammar Online, 2018. https://www.myenglishpages.com/site_php_files/grammar.php Accessed 6 Feb 2019.

General

Style Manual: For authors, editors and printers. Sixth edition, Revised by Snooks & Co., John Wiley & Sons Australia, Ltd, 2002.

Grammar books

Anderson, W., Woods, G., Ward, L., English Grammar Essentials for Dummies, Australian Edition, 2014, John Wiley & Sons Australia, Milton, Qld, Australia.

Carter, R. & McCarthy, M., Cambridge Grammar of English: A comprehensive guide, 2006, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

John Seely, Oxford Everyday Grammar, 2004, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.

Ward, L. & Woods, G., English Grammar for Dummies, 2007, John Wiley and Sons Ltd, Chichester, UK.

I'm a writer first and a woman after—Katherine Mansfield

FIVE



Five - Just Write!

Start writing, no matter what. The water does not flow until the faucet is turned on
—Louis L'Amour

This Writer Coaching Session gives practical advice on sending writer's block packing and getting your fingers over the keyboard, or your pen to paper, to write, jot, scribble, scrawl, or dash off some lines!

It also discusses joining a writers' group, and the challenges facing the introverted writer when considering this, along with the benefits and advantages. It lists Australia-wide writers' support groups for follow-up.

Compute or handwrite?

Does your writing flow better when you type on your computer, or is the old-fashioned way by putting pen to paper more satisfying for you?

I'm a fast touch-typist (thanks to a year at secretarial college in my teens, although I was never cut out to be a secretary), and I've been using computers since the 1980s.

However, I still love long-hand writing. Moreover, journalling or keeping a diary are good ways to write down ideas when you're not in the mood for working on your book, or you just want to brainstorm.

Always keep a pen and a journal or diary, or even some blank pieces of paper, in your bag or in your car so that wherever you go, you can jot down ideas. You may find yourself experiencing a truly inspired moment to finish off a scene that's been bugging you for months, or writing that brilliantly cryptic ending to your crime novel even though you're only up to page 20 of the actual writing.

It's often when our minds are relaxed that we come

³ Wikipedia, 'Eureka (word)', [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eureka_\(word\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eureka_(word)), accessed 18 December 2018

up with the most inspired ideas.

Remember Archimedes, the Ancient Greek philosopher and scholar, and his famous 'Eureka! Eureka!' in the bathtub?

For most Australians, 'Eureka' is synonymous with the gold miners' Eureka Rebellion of 1854.

In the context of inspired ideas, however, 'Eureka' is a Greek word used as an exclamation to celebrate a discovery or invention. It is attributed to Archimedes, who when stepping into his bath, noticed that the water level rose and so understood that the volume of water displaced must be equal to the volume of the part of his body he had submerged.³ He was reportedly so eager to share his discovery that he leapt out of his bathtub and ran naked through the streets of his town.

In your creative enthusiasm, I recommend that rather than maniacally running through the streets naked, you get scribbling instead!



Record your ideas

When I'm out and about without my diary or a piece of paper in sight, I use the voice recorder function on my Smartphone to capture an idea I'd probably forget

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if I didn't record it immediately. You can do standard recordings or speech-to-text. By doing the latter, you can then copy and paste your words and use them in the writing you're working on.

Writer's block and how to overcome it

You can always edit a bad page. You can't edit a blank page—Jodi Picoult

No article on writing would be complete without a section on writer's block, the affliction of most writers at some time.

Change your activity

The reason you find yourself faced with THE WRITER'S BIGGEST CURSE may be different from mine. I enjoy the challenge of not knowing what to write next and so this isn't the cause of writer's block for me. I just down tools and do a different activity and then, Eureka! like the bathtub man, the ideas arrive in a rush when I'm in the middle of vacuuming, or walking along the beach, and I can't wait to get back in front of the computer to write it all down.

What works for me – writing a blog

The main reason that the creative juices won't flow for me is because I'm procrastinating and trying to find any excuse at all not to write. It's not laziness, it's because I'm finding the task overwhelming. I may have a whole bunch of scenes to rewrite, or a great chunk that I know I have to delete and replace with new writing. The job seems bigger than Ben Hur.

At those times, I find that writing a blog works for me. It seems to free up my creativity and get me back on track with my fiction writing.

Throw in some conflict

If you don't write blogs, the other thing you can do is follow maestro storyteller Stephen King's advice in his masterful little book *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. He suggests that you throw in some conflict, or make a tragedy befall one of your characters. This advice is an absolute gem. When you analyse the parts of your book where you've got stuck, you'll more than likely find they're low points in the story, parts that are lacklustre and needing the proverbial kick up the jacksy.

Having your characters face conflict is what forms the narrative arc of your story. To find out more about narrative arc, check out *Eight: What is Narrative Arc in Writing?*

I've mentioned it before but it is worth repeating that I highly recommend King's *On Writing* to all writers. It's a short and highly entertaining read that is an invaluable reference tool.

Beth Revis, author of *Paper Hearts, Volume 1: Some Writing Advice* agrees with throwing in conflict: 'I'm fond of joking that when I get stuck in writing, I'll kill a character or blow something up (in the novel... usually).'

Chain that muse to your desk and get the job done—Barbara Kingsolver

Write your story in a thousand words

Leah McClellan has a great idea, and that is to tell your story in 1,000 words (see *Credits and resources* below). This idea resonates with me for several reasons.

One is, when someone asks me 'what's your book about?' I struggle to give a concise description. By summarising the book in 1,000 words, I can confidently tell them what my story's about in a minute or so. Of course, this is also excellent preparation for a

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publisher/agent pitch.

Another reason is it can serve as the basis for your synopsis (if you're planning to submit your manuscript to publishers/agents), or as the short book description on Amazon or other book distributor site.

A third reason I find this idea useful is that it's elegantly simple and it makes so much sense.

She suggests you make the 1,000 words as rough as you like. It doesn't need to be genius. This idea is liberating. In keeping with the title of this coaching session, 'Just write', it frees your mind and allows you to write something immediately, without constraints.

Nevertheless, Leah suggests the 1,000 words should be structured, as follows:

- First part devotes around 300 words to setting, main characters and the story's main event
- Second part of around 500 words dedicated to the challenges faced by your protagonist (main character), including the final challenge
- Closing 200 words wrap everything up with the final challenge and climax.

Set yourself a time limit and just write!

Some writers work best by setting themselves a time limit and then they write for only that amount of time. It might be 20 minutes, or two hours. If you've been stuck for a while, I'd suggest setting a shorter time so you get the satisfying feeling of being back in the zone, even if only for a short time.

Say to yourself, 'I'll work for 30 minutes max.' If the juices are really flowing after that time and you want to keep writing ... voilà ! You've broken through your writer's block.

Alternatively, if you've been experiencing a long period

of writer's block, it's probably better to stop after the 30 minutes and then work to the same 30-minute time limit every day until you form a habit. According to University College London, it takes around 66 days (up to 10 weeks) to form a new habit.

Be realistic with your expectations. If you don't think you'll manage 30 minutes a day, then write for 15 minutes.

Set yourself a word limit and just write!

You can also set yourself a word limit. Decide to achieve, say, 300 words in a writing session. That's perfectly doable. (The section *Compute or handwrite* on the first page of this chapter comprises 330 words.) When you reach your 300 words, stop. Do the same for your next writing session. And the next one after that ... and so on ...

As mentioned above, it's about building a habit. Imagine this: if you wrote 300 words a day for 66 days, you'd have written 19,800 words in that time. That's half of a novella, or a quarter of a novel. Not bad!

Dictate your writing

If you haven't learnt to touch-type and you find typing laborious, or you just need a break from the keyboard, take advantage of Microsoft Word's 'Dictate' feature.

A current client who has multiple health issues finds typing very tiring so I've only just discovered this feature and was able to recommend it to her. It's great! You need (I believe) to be using Microsoft Office 2010. Look for the microphone icon in the top right corner of your Microsoft Word menu bar 

With a Microsoft Word document open, you just click on the icon, start talking and the words appear on the page. When you say 'comma', it inserts a comma; the instruction 'full stop' inserts a full stop and 'semi-colon' inserts a semi-colon.

You have to speak clearly and relatively slowly. And

Five - Just Write!

once you have written a paragraph, you need to review it to ensure it makes sense and then edit where necessary. Please do not submit your manuscript for editing to your editor without first doing this! Well you could, but the edit is going to cost more!

'Dictate' is a fabulous tool and you don't have to spend anything (potentially hundreds of dollars) on voice recognition software. A recent client of mine invested in a software package for writing his first book and the result was pretty much nonsensical. For the second book, he simply used the dictate function in Microsoft Word with a much better result.

Read my blog

Check out my blog on five creative ways to overcome writer's block. See *Credits and resources* at the end of this chapter.

Give yourself a break

So you've tried all the above and none of the suggestions have worked for you? You're still stuck? Sounds like you need a break. Don't feel guilty. Go do something different — change your activity as suggested above. Do something that makes you feel good if that works for you. It might be going for a swim, a run, or a walk along the beach or in a rainforest. You might want to take on a job around the house. Just make it a time-delimited task, like dusting, or vacuuming, or bringing in the rubbish bins. Avoid fixing the fence or making a three-course meal, because that's just procrastinating!

It's probably also better to make it a solitary task. According to award-winning author Hilary Mantel (*Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*), if you 'make telephone calls or go to a party ... other people's words will pour in where your lost words should be. Open a gap for them, create a space. Be patient.'

Join a Writers' Group

This may be a difficult step for the 'closet' writer. What do I mean by closet writer? Any or all of the following: one who writes but who is so self-conscious, practically ashamed, of their writing attempts that they have admitted to no one they write; no one may have ever seen their writing, even their closest family; they lack any confidence in their writing; they are plagued by self-doubt: am I even a writer? How can I call myself a writer?

Yes, this used to be me.

As a group, writers can tend to be introverted, so joining a community of other writers may be the closet writer's worst nightmare.

Solitude matters, and for some people , it's the air they breathe—Susan Cain

What are the benefits of joining a writer's group?

But wait ... there are huge benefits to be gained from opening that closet door, taking a deep breath of fresh air after the rarefied atmosphere of the closet, and stepping out of your comfort zone.

One of the benefits is highlighted by my own story.

I first came out of the writer's closet back in the early 1990s. I had been thinking about joining a writers' group for years, and finally, my New Year's resolution was to do just that so I set myself a goal and went for it. At first, instead of immediately joining a writers' group, I enrolled in an evening class on creative writing at my local high school. I had to make it easy on myself.

The class attracted at least 30 other eager novice writers, so it was a bit of a shock to walk out of the closet into a crowded room. The tutor was excellent, but ruthless. The inevitable day arrived when we

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were asked ‘to read your work out to the group’, an instruction that caused my knees to tremble, my face to colour up, and my voice to shake. But I did it, and couldn’t believe the elation I felt afterwards.

When the term ended, I approached those of the group I’d made a connection with and asked them if they’d be interested in setting up a writers’ group with me. So it was that not only did I join a writers’ group, I set one up. We found a local community room prepared to host our little group for just a couple of dollars’ donation, and we met one evening a week and shared our writing over cups of tea and biscuits.

Each week, one of us would be responsible for setting writing exercises for the group. I still have some short stories from that period, which I enjoy reading even to this day. Of course, some of the writing I produced was rubbish, but that’s all part of it: experimentation, just writing, oiling the wheels of the great writing machine.

Check out my website for three stories you can download for free (see Credits and resources below).

Within a month of moving to Australia, I had joined a local writers’ group: the Gold Coast Writers’ Association. My involvement with the association lasted about four years. At the time, I also joined the novel writers’ support group, which was very helpful at the time I was developing my current novel.

Where can I find a writers’ group?

There are multiple writers’ groups throughout the Australian states and territories. In *Credits and resources* below, you’ll see a link to writers’ groups Australia-wide (and a couple of other organisations besides). It looks pretty comprehensive, although of course I can’t offer any guarantees!

Workshops, courses, literary events, writing competitions

Another benefit of being a member of a writers’ group

is that you hear about workshops, courses and writing competitions.

I was recently reading the Summer 2018 edition of Writing NSW’s newsletter *Newswrite* along with their Course Program January—June 2019. I was struck by the fine selection of workshops offered, and the calibre of the tutors.

Do you live remotely and can’t get to workshops and meetings? The good thing about the digital age is that even if you live in a remote area, some of the state/territory writing centres offer online programs.

Just as an example, Writing NSW offers several online programs. Check out the link in *Credits and resources* below for their 2019 online courses.

A quick Google search revealed that Queensland Writer’s Centre (QWC) also offers various online courses, and I’m sure the same is true of many other state/territory writers’ centres. Most of QWC’s courses are \$99, with one of them only \$19 (prices as at December 2018).

Meet likeminded people and critique each other’s work

Yet another benefit of joining a writers’ group is that you have the opportunity to meet other writers working on the same genre. You can exchange thoughts, tips and troubles, and even offer to read and critique each other’s work.

A couple of words of caution about sharing your work.

Firstly, while I would hope most writers wouldn’t think to breach a fellow writer’s copyright, you can at least partially protect yourself by including your name, date and the copyright symbol © in the header or footer of your manuscript. In Australia, you are automatically protected by copyright as soon as you produce an original piece of work. You do not need to register copyright for books. However, it doesn’t hurt to add

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another layer of protection that might make someone thinking of plagiarising think twice.

If you'd like more information about copyright in Australia, I suggest you visit the websites of the Copyright Agency, and/or the Australian Copyright Council, both of which are not-for-profit organisations. The Australian Copyright Council makes available a huge amount of free information in the form of PDFs. Start with their *Introduction to Copyright in Australia*. (Refer *Credits and resources* below.)

Secondly, while a critique from a non-professional – i.e. someone who isn't a professional editor or manuscript appraiser – can be helpful, it can also have the opposite effect, so choose your writing colleague wisely! Make sure they write in the same genre as you do, that they are prepared to offer sound, objective feedback, not just their personal opinion, and that they're not just out to inflate their own ego by putting your writing down.

'I didn't get the sense that this was your main character because ...' – giving you various reasons why they feel this way – is much more positive and helpful than 'I don't like your main character.' Or 'It would be great if you changed this long passage of narrative into dialogue here. It'll bring the writing and the character alive', gives you clear direction as opposed to 'Your writing's really long-winded!'

If you find you've paired up with someone who's criticising rather than critiquing your writing, RUN! Find someone better suited, someone who will lift you up and encourage you, not put you and your writing down.

Let's wrap this up...

We've talked about opening up your writing by thinking about:

- How you prefer to write: typing or handwriting
- Keeping a journal or diary, or dictating ideas on

the fly

- Ways to counteract writer's block, including:
 - Blogging
 - Throwing in conflict
 - Changing your activity and taking breaks
 - Summarising your story in 1,000 words
 - Setting time and word count limits
 - Dictating your writing.
- And finally, joining a writers' group.

Credits and resources

Copyright

Australian Copyright Council, <https://www.copyright.org.au/ACC/Home/ACC/Home.aspx?hkey=24823bbe-5416-41b0-b9b1-0f5f6672fc31>

Australian Copyright Council, An Introduction to Copyright in Australia, https://www.copyright.org.au/ACC_Prod/ACC/Information_Sheets/An_Introduction_to_Copyright_in_Australia.aspx

Copyright Agency, <https://www.copyright.com.au/>

Getting unstuck in writing

McClellan, L., point 5, Write your entire story in 1000 words or less, in *Stuck With Your Novel? Get Unstuck!* <http://simplewriting.org/stuck-with-your-novel-get-unstuck/> Accessed 11 Jan 2019.

Tagarro, G., editors4you, *Five Creative Steps for Overcoming Writer's Block*, 2014, <https://editors4you.com.au/five-creative-steps-for-overcoming-writers-block>

The Guardian, Hilary Mantel's rules for writers, 25 February 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/feb/22/hilary-mantel-rules-for-writers> Accessed 11 Jan 2019.

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Online writing courses

Writing NSW, <https://writingnsw.org.au/whats-on/courses/filter/course-delivery/online/>

Queensland Writers Centre, <https://qldwriters.org.au/online-courses/>

Short stories

Tagarro, G., Books, 2019, <https://editors4you.com.au/gail-tagarro-author/>

The science of habits

University College London (UCL), Healthy Habits, Science of Habits, How Long Does it Take to Form a New Habit? <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/healthy-habits/science-of-habits> Accessed Jan 2019

Writers' groups Australia-wide

<http://www.austwriters.com/AWRfiles/groups.htm>

If a nation loses its storytellers, it loses its childhood—Peter Handke

SIX



Six - Deconstructing a Manuscript

In this session, I've drawn on several manuscripts I have worked on over the years to illustrate some of the things not to do in your writing.⁴ Examples are a vivid way to illustrate concepts that can be tricky to explain in theory.

I would advise anyone who aspires to a writing career that before developing his talent he would be wise to develop a thick hide—Harper Lee

'It's just a story' – the issue of credibility

'I don't need to do research. It's just a story.'

I've heard this from a few novice writers when I've questioned the veracity of a situation, statement or character action in a book.

For instance, would Mr Civilian from Suburbsville be permitted to enter the investigation room, take part in an investigation on an equal footing with police officers and inspectors, and make decisions about the investigation, just because he was the almost-victim of a serial killer? Well, the answer is a simple 'no'.

When I raised this issue with the writer, she answered, 'It's just a story.'

Make it believable

Regardless of it being fiction, the story has to be believable. If a writer is not an expert on police procedure, then researching police procedure and weaving relevant facts into the story is vital to the credibility of the story.

What happens if you don't do the hard research yards?

If you eventually self-publish your book, you will most

⁴ Permission has been granted to use any such material.

likely get a strong negative reaction from readers, who can be merciless in their reviews. Insofar as mainstream publishing is concerned, your manuscript wouldn't make it further than the submission editor's desk.

No setting for the story

Every story needs a setting. Your reader wants to know the setting in order to orientate themselves. Setting may include:

The place the book is set. Depending on the relevance to the story, this may be the country or city/town it's set in, sometimes both. It may even be a café, or a house, or a cave in the hills.

The year it is set in. Physical objects that appear in the story must be congruent with the period. For example, there were no mobile phones freely available commercially until the 1970s, so in a story based in the 1930s or the 1950s, your characters will be communicating in other ways. Your characters won't be contactable 24/7 either.

You'll often need to mention the month and the day of the week, especially when the action happens quickly.

Whether it's summer, autumn, winter or spring, and the changing seasons throughout the development of your plot, may be relevant to the story. *Show*, and avoid *telling* readers that it is autumn, for example. Refer instead to the changing colours of leaves on the trees, the windswept parks, squirrels gathering nuts in preparation for winter ...

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An eloquent example of showing is Anton Chekhov's:



Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.

Long passages of narrative without dialogue

For readers of fiction, reading many paragraphs without any dialogue to break them up is simply hard on their poor eyes.

Aside from that, long passages of narrative can slow down the progress of your story. Inserting dialogue helps enliven the story and speed it up. (Have a look at session *Nine: What is Pacing in Fiction Writing?* for a fuller discussion on pacing and dialogue.)

I'm currently reading a book that was first published in 1936. Although it's non-fiction, it illustrates the point I'm trying to make. In the entire 106-page book, there are no subheadings, only chapter headings, and only one graphic element, a table. That's how books were

written back then. The content alone was expected to rivet the reader. Fair enough. There was a lot less competition in the book market back then.

But now is not back then. Dialogue not only speeds up the action but also gives the eyes a break. Make sure you have a good balance between narration and dialogue. Narration is useful for slowing down the pace after a series of hectic action scenes, and for providing integral backstory. Dialogue will help speed up the pace and give insight into your characters.

Clash of point of view (POV)

Let's say you've written your story in first person from the POV of the protagonist, Jemima. Then, without warning, Jemima seems to disappear – it takes the reader a while to realise this – and there follows a whole scene with another character, Richard, who takes over the action and the voice, also from first person POV. Further, Jemima and Richard have not yet met.

You can't expect the reader to suspend disbelief and accept that Jemima would know all the details of what's happening in the scene where Richard suddenly appears.

Solutions

If Richard and his actions are integral to the plot, a tidy way to resolve changes of POV include:

Using visual separators

Break the scene with visual separators such as an asterisk. It would look like this:

Jemima is narrating. Placeholder text Placeholder text Placeholder text Placeholder text Placeholder text Placeholder text ... and so on.

*

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Richard is narrating. Placeholder text
Placeholder text Placeholder text Placeholder
text Placeholder text Placeholder text ... and so
on.

*

Jemima continues narrating. Placeholder text
Placeholder text Placeholder text Placeholder
text Placeholder text ... and so on.

Starting a new chapter

Write your chapters from different characters' points of view. Then there is no confusion about who is narrating.

One-sided conversations

The cues for a reader to know when a character is talking – dialogue – are:

- the speech is usually enclosed by quotation marks
- verbs are in the present tense
- there is at least one other character involved in the conversation, with dialogue switching between the two (or more) characters.

The only times you'd have a one-sided conversation in a story is if the character is delusional and talks to themselves, or the character is thinking aloud.

But what about internal dialogue? you may ask. This is generally represented differently to distinguish it from dialogue. Internal dialogue won't generally be enclosed by quotation marks. It's often in italics, although not necessarily; it may be in Roman font. Like dialogue, the verbs will be in the present tense.

In a novel I edited for a first-time writer a couple of years back, there was a character whose speech

complied with the cues in only one respect: it was in the present tense. Other than that, the character had long monologue-type dialogue, with no interaction from other characters, and the speech was not enclosed within quotation marks. This was not planned; it was done in error and it was very difficult to follow.

Omitting vital explanations

Your protagonist (main character) is a normal everyday kind of guy, married, with a family. However, in an early scene you have him taking a very large telescope with him on a road trip with his family. You need to explain to the reader why he's taking this unusual item.

Forgetting where a character is meant to be

Say you've written a spy thriller, and three of your characters head out into the night on a surveillance mission. Let's say their names are Arthur, Antony and Aaron. Two characters stay in the van. Their names are Bert and Bill. So far so good.

In another scene a few pages on, Aaron is suddenly in the van with Bert and Bill, but Arthur and Antony have not yet returned from their mission. Oops! In fact, Aaron is still out surveilling with Arthur and Antony, but you've forgotten.

Or you have the protagonist's beloved dog helping him bring down an assailant ... but oops! He doesn't actually adopt the dog until four chapters further on.

When this happens, there's often a flow-on effect in later scenes and chapters. After correcting the boo-boo, make sure you then check later in the book for congruency with where the characters should be and who they are with.

Don't beat yourself up too much, as highly accomplished authors have been known to make huge blunders. The legendary Greek writer Homer in his epic

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poem *The Iliad* killed off a character early in the story, yet this same character was present to witness his son's death later in the poem.

Solutions

Tech solution 1: Scrivener

One way to avoid inconsistencies like the above is to use a software package like Scrivener to write your book, rather than writing it in Microsoft Word. Scrivener is a management system for documents, notes, ideas, research, images and more, so you can keep track of details like where characters are located in different scenes – as well as a whole lot more. There is a learning curve associated with coming to grips with Scrivener (personal experience!), but if you're up for the challenge, it may help you keep track not only of your characters but of all aspects of your novel or book also.

Tech solution 2: Aeon Timeline

The advertising for this software package likens it to 'a flexible Gantt chart'. Its purpose is to help writers plan, write and edit stories, and 'understand your characters, avoid plot holes and inconsistencies, and visualise your story in new ways'. (You can synch Aeon Timeline and Scrivener.) I've never personally used it so I can't give you any feedback on the learning curve or the ease of use. I recommend Googling 'Aeon Timeline Reviews' and checking out the opinions of actual users.

Tech solution 3: Excel

If you are more comfortable using Microsoft Excel than Microsoft Word for planning your storyline, keeping a record of your characters' traits and their whereabouts and so on, then Excel is a simple solution at your fingertips if you already have a subscription to Microsoft Office – which you will if you are using Microsoft Word to write your story (the illustration is for Office 365 Home).



Tech solution 4: Microsoft Word

You might prefer to use a separate document in Microsoft Word to record all the details you want to keep track of as you're writing the story. It's probably easiest to order the information in table form. See the example below.

If you are the type of writer whose story flows as it goes along, then you'll constantly add to and update the table as you are developing your story. If you're a pre-story planner, you will start populating the table with the relevant information before you start writing.

Below is a simple example. Please don't take it as the be-all and end-all.

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Character	Arthur	Aaron	Antony
Looks	33 yo. 5' 6", plump, balding, has a squint	48 yo. 6' 1", good-looking, dark hair, ponytail	55 yo. 5' 10", freckled complexion, light-brown hair thinning on top
Clothes, etc.	Dirty clothing, black heavy framed glasses. Socks and shoes	Jeans, t-shirt & thongs. Sunglasses	Suit. Wire-framed glasses
Idiosyncrasies	Nervous tic right eye	Laughs at inappropriate times	Often rubs his hands together when thinking
Scenes they appear in	Ch 1 scenes 3 & 5. Ch 4 scene 2...	Ch 1 same as Arthur. Ch 2 scene 2...	Ch 1 same as Arthur and Aaron. Ch 5 scenes 1, 3, 5

Low-tech solution: the good old-fashioned way

If you find it most satisfying to plan your novel or book manually, you can use separate sheets of paper, a large piece of cardboard or a whiteboard. If you're a visual person and it helps with your planning, you may like to use coloured pens to sketch in different aspects of your story plan.

Again, you'll be adding to your plan as you continue writing your story.

Leaving plot threads unresolved

The first draft of a crime thriller I edited had a significant plot thread whereby vital evidence was not shared between international law enforcement agencies. The book initially ended without the reason for the omission being divulged.

Solution

I suggest documenting a timeline of your story. See the heading above *Forgetting where a character is meant to be* for solutions.

Spelling characters' names different ways

This is a common one in manuscripts that cross my desk, as is misspelling a well-known person's name.

Solution

Keep a record of your characters' names, manually or in a spreadsheet or specialised program (see above *Forgetting where a character is meant to be*). Then when you're writing a scene with that character, you can check back for the correct spelling of their name. If you're storing this information electronically, you'll be able to copy and paste it into your manuscript.

For well-known individuals, do a Google search to ensure you have their name correctly spelt. I generally don't rely on a single Google search and I choose a reliable website. For example, if you're referring to another author, Googling the title of their published book is an assured way of getting the spelling of their name correct.

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Not getting a professional edit

Before submitting your manuscript to publishers or agents, or self-publishing, always, always, always make sure you have your manuscript professionally edited, preferably by an Accredited Editor (AE) or an editor with an equivalent professionally assessed qualification.

Why? If you're unconvinced that your manuscript needs to be edited, I encourage you not to just take my word for it, but to read what published authors say.

Don't believe all that nonsense ... about books not being edited any more. My editors put many weeks of work into each of my books ... One of the best things about being published is having the opportunity to craft and polish your work with the aid of an experienced, sensitive professional. Editors ... know a lot more about writing and the marketplace than you do, and they're usually right. Where you reject an editorial suggestion, make sure there's a good reason for it. I would agree with 9 out of 10 suggestions my editor makes. If you're rejecting most of them, you've got a problem—lan Irvine (author of 27 novels)

Substitute 'damn' every time you're inclined to write 'very'; your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be. — Mark Twain (prolific writer, humourist, entrepreneur, publisher and lecturer)

... everything that's ever gone public has been edited by others — and I wouldn't have it any other way. There is only a handful of writers from any genre or discipline whose work is off-

limits to editors, and if you're a first-time writer, you're unlikely to be on that list—Rob Weir (author of eight books and many articles and reviews)

If you're still unconvinced that you need to have your manuscript professionally edited, and you plan to submit to a mainstream publisher who accepts unsolicited manuscripts, think about whether after all your hard work you want to be rejected out of hand because on the first line or the first page, there are spelling mistakes and punctuation or other grammatical errors that you have overlooked.

The fact is, as writers we get so close to our work we cannot see these mistakes.

By all means, self-edit first. By doing so, you may be able to weed out and resolve a lot of time-consuming copyediting issues that will save you \$\$ when you do submit your manuscript to a professional editor.

Here are some resources that discuss self-editing.

Self-editing resources

Interview

Chris Henson, Freelance Friday: Let Stephen King Teach You How to Edit Your Own Writing, 2017.

<https://www.searchinfluence.com/2017/03/freelance-friday-let-stephen-king-teach-you-how-to-edit-your-own-writing/> Accessed 22 Jan 2019.

Books

Please note: I haven't personally read the following books. I've chosen them based on customer reviews and a minimum Amazon star rating of 4.4 out of 5.

James Scott Bell, *Revision and Self-Editing for Publication: Techniques for Transforming Your First Draft into a Novel That Sells*.

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Renni Browne & Dave King, *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers: How to Edit Yourself Into Print*.

Ashlyn Forge, *Self-Editing On a Penny: A Comprehensive Guide* Paperback, 2015.

Let's wrap this up ...

By deconstructing an amalgam of manuscripts, we've highlighted several common issues that arise in writing, especially for first-time writers. These include:

- the issue of credibility
- story setting
- insufficient dialogue
- clash of point of view
- one-sided conversations
- leaving out vital explanations
- forgetting where a character is meant to be
- leaving plot threads unresolved
- inconsistency in spelling names
- not having your manuscript professionally edited.

Credits and resources

Irvine, I., *The Truth about Publishing: Part 1 Getting There*, 2019. <https://www.ian-irvine.com/for-writers/the-truth-about-publishing/> Accessed 22 Jan 2019.

Weir, R., *The Editor Is Not Your Enemy*, 2017. <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/11/29/advice-new-authors-about-editors-essay> Accessed 22 Jan 2019.

SEVEN



Seven - Power Up Your Writing

How can you make your writing more powerful?

One way is by avoiding fluff words. Another is by simplifying your writing – which is quite different from ‘dumbing down’ writing! Using the active voice also powers up your writing, as does being able to visualise the scenes as you’re writing them. All these strategies will help make your writing more elegant and compelling.

There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed
—Ernest Hemingway

Avoid fluff words

You’re probably aware of using empty or filler words in your speech (such as *uh* or *um*), but you may be using empty words in your writing as well. Be on the lookout for these empty words that do not offer any substance to your writing, and replace them with something more appropriate. The same principle applies to phrases and sentences. Check your writing to make sure you haven’t used six or seven phrases to say something that could be better communicated in one sentence of carefully-chosen words.

Fluff words are fully discussed in *Nine, Pacing*, on page 61.

See also *Credits and resources* at the end of this chapter for various perspectives.

Simplify and make your writing more powerful

I occasionally come across writers who use lots of unnecessarily complex words and constructions in their writing. At best, this is overwriting. I understand; I used to do it myself.

Some writers, when I recommend that they *simplify* the

writing, at first misunderstand and think I’m telling them to ‘dumb down’ the writing. Not at all.

Seldom do unnecessarily complicated constructions and uncommon words make your writing and your meaning clear. Generally, the opposite happens. Now, I’m in no way suggesting that you shouldn’t use unusual words ever. In my view, that’s why dictionaries exist – for readers to look up and expand their vocabulary, making reading a learning experience.

The key is making the writing fit the genre.

I recently met with a writer who had written a thriller. He had sent me a sample of his writing, and we arranged to meet to discuss how I could add value to his manuscript. I read the excerpt and saw he had used very long, complicated sentences, and complex words. When we met, he asked me if I could tell him just one thing that would improve his book. I said that the story was promising and certainly worth pursuing, however, the main challenge he faced was simplifying the sentence structure and using more accessible words. He looked at me aghast and suggested I was asking him to dumb down the writing.

So I asked him, is your book literary fiction or commercial fiction? He answered that it was commercial fiction of course. So I explained that he needed to write to suit his audience, and that his audience weren’t high-brow intellectuals, but normal people who liked a good thriller thank you very much. It was clear to me from his writing and our face-to-face meeting that he was an intelligent man who liked to make use of his extensive vocabulary. But he was using it in the wrong book.

He was ‘guilty’ of using *redundancy*, *pleonasms* and *prolix* in his writing. Redundancy refers to repeating the same thing using different words. Politicians are experts at this! A pleonasm is where more words than necessary are used to express an idea. A prolix style is where the writing is tediously long and contains many inconsequential details. Not that I said any of this so blatantly to the gentleman!

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I explained that if we worked together I would give him examples from his writing of where, why and how to simplify. Nevertheless, he was so taken aback by my suggestion to simplify his writing style, and he argued his point so vehemently, that I was convinced he would tell me to go take a flying leap at myself. But he clearly mulled over my advice because a day later, he came back asking me to do a manuscript appraisal.

Let's illustrate with some examples and you can decide for yourself which sounds better, the original or the rewrite.

Original:

Heated tension suddenly charged the vehicle interior, the atmosphere toxic, distrusting - the exact circumstance he had wanted to avoid; anger only clouded judgement, anger compelled unsound decisions be made because anger too often lacked the filter of reason.

Rewrite:

He had wanted to avoid this (atmosphere of) tension and distrust. Without the filter of reason, rage only clouded judgement, leading to unsound decisions.

Original:

His fingers clawed hard on the armrests as he lost his bearing, slipping through the loose sands of indecision.

Rewrite:

His fingers clawed hard on the armrests. He no longer knew what to do.

Original:

They had been through much together, he and these people, who only a day before knew nothing of each other's existence. Only now, reflecting

upon his decision to leave, did he appreciate how their shared experience had produced a galvanising effect, fusing all of them collectively.

Rewrite:

The four of them had met only the day before, but having been through so much since then, they had forged an unbreakable bond.

What happens when the writing is unnecessarily complicated is that it slows down the story. In an action thriller, as illustrated in the examples above, it's vital to keep the story fast-paced, not slow it down so the reader has to labour through layers of unnecessary words.

Use the active voice

In sentences with the active voice, the subject performs the action.

Example:

John is driving the tractor.

A famous author wrote that book.

When that sentence is converted to the passive voice, the subject is 'acted upon' by the verb.

Example:

The tractor **was driven** by John.

That book **was written** by a famous author.

The passive voice has a place, but seldom in fiction writing. It's easy to avoid using it. Using the passive voice can lead to ambiguity, and you don't want to confuse readers by having them wonder who you're referring to.

The passive voice is often used in legal documents,

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and in signs and instructions:

Trespassers will be prosecuted.

The execution of Clause 1.1 will be carried out without question.

All members of the committee will be required to vote.

Let me give you some examples of sentences in the passive voice converted into the active voice. Notice how the active sentence gives clear and unambiguous information.

During your induction, you **will be shown** how to operate the forklift.

During your induction, Dan **will show** you how to operate the forklift.

The bake sale **was run** by the committee.

The committee **ran** the bake sale.

The rule **will be changed** when it is seen fit to do so.

Management **will change** the rule when they see fit to do so.

The baby otter **was carried** on its mother's back.

The mother otter **carried** the pup on her back.

The bathroom **was renovated** by Tina and Tim.

Tina and Tim **renovated** the bathroom.

Writing a novel is not merely going on a shopping expedition across the border to an unreal land: it is hours and years spent in the factories, the streets, the cathedrals of the imagination—Janet Frame

Can you see what you write?

Imagine you're watching a movie as you're writing your story. Write visually, cinematically.

How much more effective is:

The distant hills shimmered pink in the fading light.

To:

The hills were lit up by the sun sinking below the western horizon.

The first sentence above is also in the active voice and is showing, not telling. So it's a triple winner!

And consider this amazing image of a tree by Katherine Mansfield:

Then something immense came into view; an enormous shock-haired giant with his arms stretched out. It was the big gum-tree outside Mrs. Stubbs' shop, and as they passed by there was a strong whiff of eucalyptus. And now big spots of light gleamed in the mist. The shepherd—Katherine Mansfield (The Garden Party and Other Stories)

Use concrete nouns and strong verbs

Instead of using non-specific nouns, and adjectives and adverbs to *qualify* nouns and verbs, concrete

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nouns and active verbs will bring your writing alive. You will find that exercising your creativity will make your writing more satisfying and enjoyable too!

Examples:

Her dress is **very** pretty.

Her dress is stunning. (*Better still, say what type of dress and add detail to the scene: Her cocktail dress, cinched at the waist, accentuated her slender figure. All eyes were drawn to her when she entered the room.*)

The sunset is **really** spectacular.

The sunset is spectacular (*or if you want to get really creative: As the sun set, the horizon exploded in shards of colour.*)

'Please **tell** me!' he pleaded **pathetically**.

'Please tell me!' he pleaded, his chin trembling (*or some other physical gesture*)

The **dog** wagged its tail.

The Brittany spaniel wagged its stumpy tail. (*Giving the breed helps readers form a vivid picture of the dog.*)

The real estate agent is **nice**.

Marguerite, the real estate agent we've engaged to market our property, assured us we'll have no trouble selling. She also gave us a bottle of expensive Champagne.

- Simplify your writing
- Use the active voice
- Create highly visual scenes – think how a scene would look on the big screen
- Use concrete nouns and active verbs.

Credits and resources

Fluff words

<https://www.grammarcheck.net/filler-words/>

<https://wordvice.com/avoid-fillers-powerful-writing/>

<http://grammar.yourdictionary.com/grammar/style-and-usage/avoid-these-filler-words-in-your-writing.html>

https://www.scribendi.com/advice/how_to_eliminate_wordiness.en.html

Let's wrap this up ...

By experimenting and having fun along the way, you can make your writing infinitely more powerful.

- Avoid fluff words

EIGHT



Eight - What is Narrative Arc in Writing?

Narrative arc

In simple terms, the narrative arc in writing is the evolution of your story, from beginning to end.

Gustav's analysis

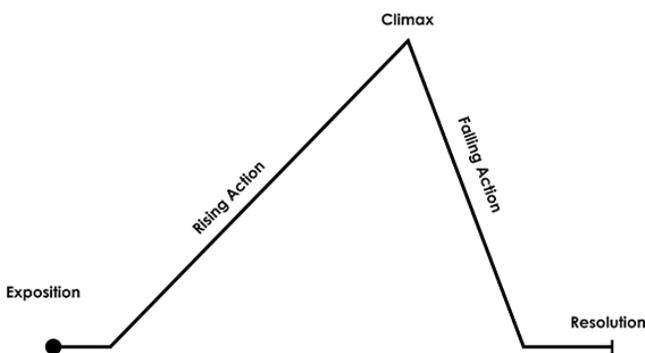
Gustav Freytag (nineteenth-century German novelist and playwright) analysed drama as being divided into five parts. This comprises the narrative arc:

1. Exposition
2. Rising Action
3. Climax
4. Falling Action
5. Denouement

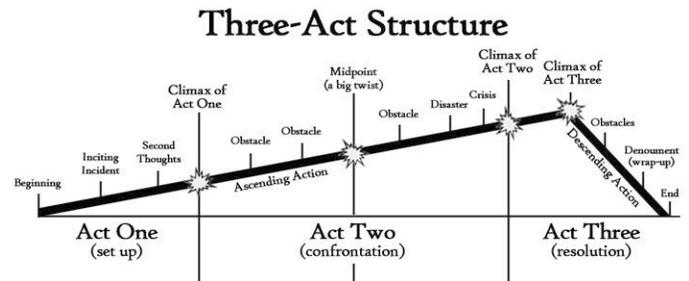
We'll define these elements in a moment.

Represented diagrammatically, it looks like this:

Plot Diagram



If we combine the elements of Freytag's Triangle with the structure of a play or script that is divided into acts, the diagram looks like this:



The parts of a story

Let's now define the parts of a story.

Exposition: 'the opening section of a text in which characters are introduced and the background of their situation presented' (Macquarie Dictionary). This shows a character in their normal life.

Rising Action and Inciting Moment (or incident): Rising action starts with a conflict, for example, a character's death. The inciting incident is the beginning of the major conflict, spurring the protagonist into action. There is a complication to be resolved. The character's normal life has changed. Events continue to build up until the climax. These events change the protagonist through the crises, lessons, conflicts, ordeals and obstacles he/she has to face.

Climax (or crisis): this is the turning point of the story, and the defining moment for the protagonist. The protagonist makes a big decision that defines the outcome of the story as well as who they are as a person.

Falling Action and Reversal: The falling action consists of a reversal or setback – an incident or a series of incidents – that puts the protagonist further than ever from attaining their goal. It seems that all is lost, and the antagonist often has the advantage.

Eight - What is Narrative Arc in Writing?

Falling Action and Final Suspense: The falling action begins to tie up the story's loose ends and leads the story towards its end. The final suspense is a miniature climax, intended to make the reader doubt whether the conflict has truly been resolved.

Denouement: The conflict ends. Life returns to normal for the protagonist, although they are changed as a result of their experiences.

How to build a narrative arc

Narrative arc vs plot

What is the difference between plot and narrative arc?

The **plot** comprises the individual events in a story. It is the skeleton upon which the story hangs. The **narrative arc** is the sequence of those events, or the chronological construction of the plot.

Plot is people. Human emotions and desires founded on the realities of life, working at cross purposes, getting hotter and fiercer as they strike against each other until finally there's an explosion—that's Plot—Leigh Brackett

Let's look at the **plot** – the series of events that takes place – in the children's fairytale, Cinderella:

1. Cinderella lives with her father, who is a widow.
2. Cinderella's father remarries, bringing a stepmother and two stepsisters to live with them.
3. Cinderella's father dies and she is forced to be their servant.
4. A ball is organised for Prince Eric, the heir to the kingdom, to find a wife.
5. Cinderella wants to go to the ball. Her

stepmother tells her she can only go if she finishes all her household duties, knowing that Cinderella couldn't possibly finish them in time and that she has no dress to wear.

6. Cinderella's Fairy Godmother appears, transforming a ruined dress into a beautiful ballgown and a pumpkin into a carriage to convey her to the ball. Her Fairy Godmother warns her that she must leave at midnight because the spell will be broken then.
7. The prince rejects every girl at the ball until Cinderella appears.
8. Cinderella hears the clock strike midnight and runs away, leaving a glass slipper behind.
9. The palace organises a search through the kingdom to find the foot that the slipper will fit.
10. Her stepmother realises Cinderella somehow made it to the ball and that the slipper belongs to her. She locks her up in the attic.
11. Cinderella's friends, the mice that live in the house, steal the attic key from the stepmother and take it to Cinderella.
12. The ugly stepsisters try on the slipper that the prince brings, but it doesn't fit them.
13. The mice free Cinderella and she tries on the slipper. It fits perfectly.
14. Cinderella and the prince marry and live happily ever after.

There is only one plot—things are not what they seem—Harper Lee

Now let's look at the **narrative arc** of Cinderella:

Exposition: Cinderella is a happy young girl who

Eight - What is Narrative Arc in Writing?

lives a life of comfort long ago in a land far away. But her mother dies and her father remarries almost immediately. He brings a stepmother and two stepsisters into her life. They hate her. When her father dies, they treat her like a servant.

Rising Action and Inciting Moment: Cinderella works from dawn to dusk as a servant. She hears about the ball at the palace and she's excited about going. But her evil stepmother and stepsisters won't hear of it. Her Fairy Godmother turns up and magically provides her with a dress and transportation to the ball.

Climax: Cinderella is the most beautiful girl at the ball. She catches the prince's eye, they dance until midnight, and he falls in love with her.

Falling Action and Reversal: The clock strikes midnight and Cinderella hurries away, losing one of her glass slippers. The prince searches the entire town looking for the girl who fits the glass slipper. Her stepmother hides her away.

Falling Action and Final Suspense: The prince persists in asking if there is another girl in the house. Cinderella steps into the room and he tries the glass slipper on her.

Denouement: The slipper fits her perfectly. Cinderella and the prince are married and they live happily ever after.

Narrative arc in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Let's finish by looking at the narrative arc in Harper Lee's classic southern American novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Exposition: The Finch family, comprising Atticus (father, lawyer) and his two children, Scout and Jem, live in Maycomb, Alabama in the 1930s during the Great Depression. It is a time of racism and prejudice.

Rising Action and Inciting Moment: Tom Robinson, a black man, is accused of raping a white woman. Atticus is asked to defend him, a difficult task because of the racial prejudice of the era. Scout and Jem become the centre of attention throughout the high-profile trial. They experience difficulties and learn valuable lessons about justice and what is right.

Climax: Tom Robinson is found guilty and Scout and Jem find it hard to reconcile the bigotry and hatred of their neighbours who are sending an innocent man to his death.

Falling Action and Reversal: Bob Ewell, the father of the girl who was 'raped' by Tom, threatens Atticus and Tom's wife, but then, he goes after Scout and Jem instead to exact his revenge.

Falling Action and Final Suspense: Scout and Jem are attacked in the dark on their way back home after a Halloween pageant. Jem is knocked unconscious by their attacker, but they escape serious harm when their reclusive neighbour, Boo Radley, kills their attacker. To protect Boo, Scout agrees to say that Bob Ewell fell on his own knife. Scout realises it is best to leave Boo in peace.

Denouement: Scout walks Boo home. She realises that Boo has been looking out for her and Jem most of their lives.

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NINE



Nine - What is Pacing in Fiction Writing?

Pace or pacing refers to the speed at which a story is told. This doesn't necessarily coincide with the chronological events of the story.

Pacing is determined by the length of the scenes, the speed of the action and how quickly the writer provides the reader with information. The genre of the story often also determines the pacing of the story. Comedies move faster than dramas; action stories move faster than suspense stories.

Why is it important to get pacing right?

It's all about reader engagement. Publishers will reject manuscripts that are not sufficiently fast-paced. Of more relevance nowadays to many writers who self-publish, readers will also reject a novel that moves too slowly.

Where in a story should you increase the pacing?

The main parts are the opening of the story, the middle and the climax. Of course, there may also need to be fast-paced scenes in other parts of your story and you are the judge of where best to situate these to keep your reader's interest.

How can you speed up pacing?

Action and dialogue are two of the most effective ways to speed up pacing.

Introduce more dialogue

Effective dialogue sets your characters and the reader firmly in the present moment. Avoid overusing dialogue tags such as 'he said, she said' when it's obvious in an

exchange which characters are speaking.

Show don't tell

Resist the temptation to use adverbs in dialogue tags to describe how (*this is telling*) a character says something because:

- your characterisation should have previously shown a character's traits so that the reader will know how the character is likely to react
- the dialogue should be strong enough to stand alone
- you can use body language and gestures to show how a character says something.

An example is, don't *tell* how someone said something by using adverbs like slowly, angrily, gruffly, loudly. *Show* how they said it.

I highly recommend *The Emotion Thesaurus: A Writer's Guide to Character Expression*, by Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi. This small guide will help you convey your characters' emotions in a unique, compelling way, showing your readers how your characters say and do things rather than telling them as above. See *Credits and resources* below for *The Emotion Thesaurus* and my blog *Show Don't Tell*.

Make it snappy

Use snappy dialogue and short sentences. Have your characters debate, argue, confront in their speech, not ponder, wonder or philosophise.

Action

Action scenes are about things that happen, so be sure not to slow them down with too much description or a lot of distractions. Imagine a person confronted in the wild by a tiger. About the only thing they'll be thinking

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of is survival – how to make it out of there alive. You wouldn't have the character carrying out a long discourse with themselves (or the tiger!), or describing how pretty the jungle looks.

In action scenes, it pays to keep sentences short and to the point.

In a recent crime thriller manuscript I appraised, the action frequently stalled in focal scenes. The writer deviated from the scene to describe a character who he had failed to fully introduce when the character first entered the story. Needless to say, an action scene is not the place for character description.

Abbreviate

Shorten sentences, paragraphs, chapters and scenes to create a faster pace.

If you're a writer who naturally writes long sentences and long paragraphs and you're writing an action book or an action scene, you may struggle with shortening your sentences and paragraphs. Here are some suggestions.

Sentences

It can be as simple as breaking down a sentence joined by a conjunction into two sentences. Example:

John and Mary were breathless after chasing the intruder down the street **but** [conjunction] they forced themselves to run back to the house to phone the police.

John and Mary were breathless after chasing the intruder down the street. They forced themselves to run back to the house to phone the police.

While not a riveting example, you can see that using two shorter sentences instead of one long one immediately increases the pace of the writing.

Look for a change of topic in paragraphs

To break long paragraphs down into shorter ones, look for a slight change of topic and break it there. It's easy with dialogue, because each character's dialogue should be in a separate paragraph.

In an action novel or an action scene, as a rule of thumb I'd recommend paragraphs of no longer than three sentences or six to eight lines.

Keep it simple (but not stupid)

I do not over-intellectualise the production process. I try to keep it simple: Tell the damned story—Tom Clancy

When assessing manuscripts, I often recommend economy and simplicity in writing – writing in an economical style, keeping sentences simple, making every word that you write count.

This does not mean 'dumbing down' the writing. By using economy of style, and saying something in a direct and simple way rather than using an unnecessarily complicated sentence, you make your meaning immediately clear to the reader. They can continue with your compelling story, rather than having to re-read a sentence or a paragraph all because the meaning isn't clear.

Language is your friend: Use the active voice

The lion eats the mouse.

The boy hit the cat.

Thugs attacked the man.

The above sentences are all written in the active voice. The active verbs used here are *eats*, *hit*, *attacked*. The

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subject of the verbs are the doers of the action: the lion, the boy, thugs.

In the passive voice, they would read as follows:

The mouse was eaten by the lion.

The cat was hit by the boy.

The man was attacked by thugs.



Passive verbs are used: *was eaten, was hit, was attacked*. The subject of the verbs moves from the doer of the action to the person or animal on whom the action is carried out: the mouse, the cat, the man.

The passive voice removes the reader a step back from the action.

The active voice is direct and immediate. It centres the reader firmly in the action.

Use words to your best advantage

This is the fun part of writing and you can really let your creative juices flow!

Use **onomatopoeia**. This lovely word comes from the Greek and means a word that sounds like or suggests the sound it describes. Examples are cuckoo, miaow, tick-tock, oink, buzz, hiss. Use onomatopoeic verbs

to increase the pace of your story. Verbs like argh, bang, bash, boom, clang, clatter, clunk, giggle, shuffle, splatter, squelch, whoosh ...

Imagine a character who hisses something to another character instead of saying it. That one verb used in optimal context could convey a whole raft of meaning and give a powerful insight into the character.

Lively language helps build a fast pace, and suspense. As Jessica Page Morrell says in her book *Crafting Novels & Short Stories* (quoted in *Writer's Digest* – see *Credits and resources* below), 'Harsh consonant sounds such as those in words like claws, crash, kill, quake, and nag can push the reader ahead. Words with unpleasant associations can also ratchet up the speed: hiss, grunt, slither, smarmy, venomous, slaver, and wince.'

Remove fluff words

This is a favourite of mine. It comes up time and time again in the manuscripts I assess and edit. Fluff words just pad out writing; they are not integral to the writing, they do not progress the story, and they seldom add any meaning. They're words we might use in everyday life when we're talking with someone, but we need to leave them out of our stories. It is lazy writing.

Common fluff words

Here are some sentences with the fluff words bolded. Just remove those words and voila! The sentence loses nothing but gains momentum:

The boy who witnessed both his parents being shot vowed **then and there** that one day, he'd take his revenge.

We **basically** told him to take his things and leave and also never to come back **to boot**.

I take my car to the mechanic for regular maintenance but I hardly ever vacuum it and **certainly** rely on the rain to wash it.

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Other fluff words that can creep into the narrative of a manuscript are *actually, certainly, definitely, feel, in actual fact, in fact, just, quite, rather, realise, really, so, somewhat, very, well* (the latter often as the first word in dialogue) ...

Some fluff phrases are *in the direction of, a number of* and *in a short while*. Use instead *towards, several* and *soon*.

Maybe in dialogue ...

Fluff words may be useful in dialogue to help with characterisation. For example, you can portray pomposity in a character with an oft-said fluff phrase, **in actual fact**. Or depict an Englishman who peppers his speech with ‘**Quite! Quite!**’ Just avoid them in narrative.

...The road to hell is paved with adverbs—
Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*

Adverbs are among the chief culprits of fluff words. Adverbs modify verbs (and other parts of speech, but let’s keep this simple). With a verb, they indicate how an action is carried out.

Walk is a verb and *slowly* is an adverb. But it is much more powerful to say *You dawdle/dillydally/loiter/shilly-shally/plod/drag your heels* than to say *You walk slowly*. Come on, you’ve got to agree with that! It’s great fun using your imagination and the thesaurus to unearth these wonderful words.

Let’s look at some examples. By replacing the adverb (bolded), you not only show the reader but you also have the chance to fill out your characters:

‘Tommy, you can’t eat your sandwiches until lunchtime,’ the schoolteacher said **kindly**.

The schoolteacher patted Tommy’s hand and said, ‘Dear, you need to wait until lunchtime to eat your

sandwiches.’

Pat knocked on the door **nervously**.

Pat’s palms were sweaty and she was biting her lower lip as she knocked on Jack’s door.

Sylvia sat cross-legged on the floor and **peacefully** began her meditation.

Sylvia sat cross-legged on the floor. With a smile, she closed her eyes and began her meditation.

John threw the book with **force** at the wall.

Planting his legs wide, his body tensed, John hurled the book at the wall.

The vice-president looked **confidently** at the other board members.

The vice-president steeped his fingers and relaxed into his high-backed chair, looking the other board members in the eye.

Again, get hold of *The Emotion Thesaurus* (see *Credits and resources* below) to learn how to use gestures and characters’ visceral reactions instead of writing lazily by using adverbs.

Leave out obvious steps

Where you have a character making a cup of tea before a tense scene where they are interviewed by the police inspector, skip describing how they boil the kettle, add the tea to the teapot, fill it up with water, wait for it to steep ... etc.

That may be appropriate for a procedural step-by-step instruction on a tea packet, but not in a scene in a fiction novel where you want to move the action forward.

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Instead, condense the steps, and focus on the action.

Patrick made a pot of tea and carried it into the lounge, trying to hide how much his hands were shaking. Detective Inspector Marsh was sitting on his favourite chair waiting for him.

You do not have to explain every single drop of water contained in a rain barrel. You have to explain one drop — H₂O. The reader will get it—George Singleton

Summarise

When you've written a scene that includes certain characters, keep in mind that your reader is also 'in on it'. They are privy to what's happened. So avoid repeating from another character's point of view information you've already covered. Just because that character was absent from the scene does not justify repeating what readers already know.

Summarise it instead.

Let's consider an example.

Three characters are in a room together: Detective Inspector Marsh and a young married couple, Louise and Robert Evans. DI Marsh is explaining a complicated set of events to Louise and Robert. So far so good. Like a fly on the wall, the reader is in on this conversation.

Moving to another scene, Louise has to tell her parents about the event. Here is where you need to summarise and simplify what DI Marsh explained to them, not have Louise retell the whole complicated story to her parents. If you do, you risk the reader becoming very frustrated. They are expecting the action to move along, not stall.

It's cliffhanger time

A cliffhanger is a dramatic, exciting or suspenseful end to a chapter (usually) that makes the reader want to flip the page over and keep reading to see what happens next. It is also **abrupt** – one to three sentences maximum. Naturally, this accelerates the pace of the writing.

Most writers I work with seem to intuitively know how to write a cliffhanger, and even novice writers are pretty good at ending their chapters on these high notes.

Just remember to tell the reader what happens when they do turn the page! The cliffhanger needs to be resolved on the next page, in the next chapter or at the most, in the next scene involving that character – unless it's necessary to the plot to keep the reader in suspense. While the cliffhanger ends abruptly, you can draw out the suspense in the resolution that follows.

A cliffhanger can be highly dramatic: you leave your character in a precarious or dangerous situation, such as facing a crazed serial killer. Or it can be emotionally dramatic: how does Emmy react when she discovers her husband has been unfaithful to her?

Do you ever need to slow down the pace?

Yes, this is sometimes necessary. Even a fast-paced action novel that's been going at breakneck speed needs to slow down sometimes to give the reader time to catch their breath. So much has been happening that it becomes too much for the reader to absorb. You might need to slow down the pace before the climax, or before the denouement. (Refer *Eight: What is Narrative Arc in Writing?*)

Ways to slow pacing down

Flashback

A flashback is a scene interspersed in the narrative

Nine - What is Pacing in Fiction Writing?

that takes the story further back in time from the story setting. Flashback may explain something about a character the reader didn't know, or fill in crucial backstory.

Description

This might be describing a setting in nature, a room in a house, a character's clothes or mannerisms or quirks. As with all parts of your story, the description needs to be relevant to the scene and to the story.

Subplots

A sub-plot is a secondary strand of the plot that is a supporting side story for the main plot.

If your story is moving too fast, it may be that it lacks subplots. Subplots slow down the pace of a story and also add depth to the story.

Places you can insert a subplot. You might write a subplot from a different character's point of view, or introduce a further complication. Inserting a subplot is an effective way of showing that time has passed between two or more scenes in your story. You can also insert a subplot between a cliffhanger and its resolution (see above where we discuss cliffhangers).

Weaving the subplot. You need to weave your subplot into your story – it can't stand alone – and it needs a resolution just like the main plot. Subplots must explore and relate to the main theme of the story and also have a beginning, a middle and an end. Like the main plot, they also need a narrative arc: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, denouement. (See Eight: *What is Narrative Arc in Writing?*) The difference is, subplots are much shorter than the main plot.

Bear in mind that although you are weaving subplots into your main plot, the main plot still needs to be capable of standing alone. If you were to remove a subplot, the story might lack depth and the novel might be a lot shorter, but it still needs to make sense by itself.

Example: Ocean's Eleven. The main plot of the movie is that a group of con artists led by Danny Ocean plan a grand heist on the vaults of three of Las Vegas' largest casinos. One of the subplots is that Ocean's former wife Tess is now dating the owner of the casinos they're planning to rob. Ocean wants to take the owner down and get his wife back.

How many subplots? Around one to three subplots should be enough for a novel.

Introspection

You can slow down the pace of your novel by showing what your characters are thinking and feeling, giving the reader insights into how they come to their decisions. In Jean-Michel Guenassia's novel *The Incurable Optimists*, young protagonist Michel Marini reflects on the way parents never reveal to their children anything that went on in their (the adults') lives before their children were born.

To begin with, we're too young to understand, later on we're too grown up to listen, then we haven't got time, and afterwards it's too late. That's the thing about family life. We live cheek by jowl with people as though we know one another, but we know nothing about anybody.

Let's wrap this up ...

We've discussed why pacing in fiction writing is important, when and how to speed up the pacing, and when and how to slow it down.

We've covered 10 ways to *speed up* pacing in your writing:

1. Dialogue
2. Show don't tell
3. Action

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4. Abbreviating and simplifying
5. Active voice
6. Using onomatopoeia and lively language
7. Fluff words
8. Condensing obvious steps
9. Summarising scenes
10. Using cliffhangers

We've discussed these ways to slow down the pace:

1. Flashback
2. Description
3. Subplots
4. Introspection

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Credits and resources

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TEN



Ten - What is Head-Hopping In Writing?

What is head-hopping?

Head-hopping is when the writer changes the viewpoint character or point of view (POV) without warning.

What happens to the reader when a writer head-hops?

The reader is suddenly yanked from one character's viewpoint to a different character's viewpoint. This is disorientating and confusing.

Examples of head-hopping

In the first sentence below, the narration is from first person singular ('I') POV. However, in the second sentence, the writer 'hops' into the head of Jack, bypassing the first character from whose POV the story is being told. It takes the reader a few seconds to adjust and realise the writer has head-hopped. In the example below, the writer head-hops from 'I' to 'Jack'.

'Gee, thanks Mum and Dad!' I said. 'What a makeover!'

Jack didn't look enthusiastic. I wonder what the room looked like before, he thought.

The examples that follow are taken from a blog I wrote on my website some time ago. Below, the first paragraph is written from Amber's POV in first person:

I was driving through town when Mr Gallagher drove straight into my car. I could barely speak from shock. It had only been two days since he had done the same thing to my father. Was this deliberate? I wondered.

Mr Gallagher stopped, got out of his car and inspected the damage. He had deliberately driven into Amber's car, but he wanted to make it look like an accident.

However, see the problem in the second paragraph? The writer has head-hopped to Mr Gallagher.

One solution is to rewrite the second paragraph to remain from Amber's POV:

Mr Gallagher stopped, got out of his car, and inspected the damage. I still couldn't tell if he had deliberately driven into me. He seemed to be genuinely inspecting the damage and concerned at the inconvenience he had caused me, but I just couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that he was being insincere.

Sometimes, it becomes too hard to sustain the narrative from first person POV, especially in a novel. The solution is to rewrite the book from the POV of the omniscient third-person narrator.

They were driving through town when Mr Gallagher drove straight into Amber's car. She could barely speak from shock. It had only been two days since he had done the same thing to her father. Was this deliberate? she wondered.

Mr Gallagher stopped, got out of his car, and inspected the damage. He had deliberately driven into Amber's car, but he wanted to make it look like an accident.

How to avoid head-hopping

Before you start writing, decide on the POV you want to use in your writing. It will be easier to remain focused on maintaining it once you've made the decision.

How do I handle writing from different characters' points of view?

There are various tools in your writer's toolbox that you

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can use to write from various characters' POV. Here are some:

1. Use omniscient POV. You can avoid head-hopping by writing the book from third-person omniscient – or bird's eye – POV. It is the easiest way to avoid head-hopping, and arguably the easiest POV to use in fiction writing. In this POV, you 'employ' a narrator to tell the story from an objective viewpoint. The narrator sees and hears everything, like a fly on the wall. It is a powerful POV.

Example:

The outside bedroom in the shed received a wondrous lift for the honeymooners when they returned home after several years overseas. Her parents furnished it with a double bed and a table, repapered the walls, laid new carpet, painted the woodwork and hung new curtains.

'Gee, thanks Mum and Dad!' Annie said. 'It looks awesome! We really didn't expect you to go to this trouble.'

Jack, Annie's husband, simply smiled. He wondered how on earth it had looked before the makeover.

In the above, the writer is not restricted to anyone's POV. She has unlimited access to everyone's thoughts and feelings. It is a powerful POV.

See how first person POV below differs from this:

The outside bedroom in the shed received a wondrous lift for us, the honeymooners, when we returned home after several years overseas. Mum and Dad furnished it with a double bed and a table, repapered the walls, laid new carpet, painted the woodwork and hung new curtains.

'Gee, thanks Mum and Dad!' I said.

I looked over at Jack. He didn't seem very

enthusiastic. I'll talk to him later when we're alone, I thought.

In the above, the writer is restricted to seeing things from Gayle's POV.

2. Create a visual scene separator in the chapter. This is a super-simple tip! When you need to switch from one character's POV to another's in the same chapter, a good way to do this is to use a scene separator. It is as simple as inserting an asterisk separator (or two, or three) between paragraphs.

Example:

(Character called Dotty): I looked at my watch and sighed. Will this never end? I wondered.

* *

(Character called Ben): When I woke up the next morning, I knew something was wrong. Where was Dotty?

Cautionary note: Don't overdo this! Be mindful that readers may still get lost if you are switching between several characters' POV, regardless of using a scene separator. Try to stick to around two different characters' POV in a single chapter. If you absolutely must introduce more characters, then consider starting a new chapter instead. Your manuscript will become extremely messy and unappealing visually if a chapter is flooded with asterisk separators. I'd recommend around no more than two per chapter, three at the outside for a long chapter.

Note: you can also use scene separators for changes in time or location.

3. Begin the opening sentence of your chapter with the new character. When you're starting a new chapter from a different character's POV, begin your first sentence with that character.

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Example:

Dotty watched Robert raise his bushy eyebrows and fix her with an unwavering glare. 'I expect the truth!' he said. 'Mess with me at your peril.'

She shrank back. He had confused her with someone else, she was sure of it. But would he believe her?

By introducing the viewpoint character in the first paragraph of the new chapter, your readers are instantly orientated.

4. Give your characters names. Whenever there's the possibility of confusion, make sure you name your characters. Instead of saying 'he' or 'she', say Dotty, or Ruth, or Robert, or Ben said/did such-and-such. Yes, writers can go overboard in dialogue if they *always* say 'Robert said' if it's obvious that Robert and Dotty are the only two characters in the scene. This suggestion is to avoid confusion in a scene. In a long piece of dialogue, even between two characters, readers can lose their way, so saying who's speaking when it may not be clear helps them navigate the dialogue seamlessly.

5. Use dialogue to 'get into the heads' of more minor characters. If you do your job as a writer well, your readers will identify intimately with the main and supporting characters, but they don't need an emotional investment with minor characters. Instead of trying to write the thoughts of minor characters, use dialogue instead. In the following example, George is the protagonist (main character), but Lewis appears only a few times in the story and his role isn't pivotal to the plot. Readers haven't identified strongly with him, whereas they have with George.

Example:

George crawled through the undergrowth towards the campsite and spotted one of the kidnappers making a fire. It's now or never, he thought.

Lewis's head snapped up as George continued crawling towards the fire. 'John!' he whispered to their third companion. 'Can you get the hell over there and check out those bushes! There's some rustling going on and it's giving me the heebie-jeebies!' He shuddered.

Is head-hopping ever good?

There are places where head-hopping can work when handled carefully. This means you have to understand that you're doing it; you're not just doing it unconsciously. In *The Pros and Cons of Head Hopping*, Jennifer Ellis gives some examples of where it might work. See *Credits and resources* at the end of this section for the link.

Why is reader engagement crucial?

Writing fiction is all about reader engagement and interest – keeping your readers in the picture, and having your readers *identify with* your characters, especially your main characters. If you are forever switching between character viewpoints in the same chapter, or worse, in the same scene – or sacré bleu! – in the same sentence or paragraph, it's like trying to watch two different games of tennis at once, swivelling not your head but your mind around who's saying and doing what and why.

If the reader needs to constantly reread sentences or paragraphs in order to understand what's going on, they will inevitably become so frustrated they will eventually lose interest in your story. Once or twice may be forgiven, but more than that and you are in peril of losing your reader entirely.

The key is always to keep your reader engaged in your story, not to disengage or disorientate them by disrupting the story flow.

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Let's wrap this up ...

While head-hopping is generally discouraged in quality writing, the ultimate question to ask always is, 'does it work?' As the writer, you may not be the best qualified to answer the question! So ask a professional to check your work, or even ask your family to read a scene for you and tell you if they're confused about the characters.

If it works, then that's what matters most.

But as mentioned earlier, to break rules, you first need to *understand* them.

When great writers who know the rules break them, their writing can become unexpectedly powerful. The following aren't examples of head-hopping, but they illustrate the point.

Consider William Faulkner, who wrote extremely long, complicated sentences. Cormack McCarthy, who juxtaposed long and short sentences with little punctuation. James Joyce, whose soliloquy in one of his books has over 24,000 words punctuated only by two full stops and one comma, and who used run-on sentences to distraction.

It's worth repeating: You have to know and understand the rules to break them. Please don't think that just because Faulkner, McCarthy or Joyce did it, you can. They earned the right through a lifelong apprenticeship to writing!

Credits and resources

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Let me live, love, and say it well in good sentences—Sylvia Plath

BONUS



Bonus Chapter - Self-Publishing Your Book

Unlike the traditional publishing model ... the author controls the entire process, including design, price, distribution, marketing, and public relations. The author may perform these activities themselves or they may outsource these tasks. In traditional publishing, the publisher bears the costs, such as editing, marketing, and paying advances, and reaps a substantial share of the profits; by comparison, in self-publishing, the author bears all of these costs but earns a higher share of the profit—
Wikipedia

So you've decided to self-publish?

What you need to know about self-publishing your book

There are two main ways to go about self-publishing your book. You can either do it yourself, or you can hire an author services company to do all or part of the process for you.

But first, a word of advice...

There is no such thing as a self-publishing company

...unless it's your own. As Dave Bricker says in his excellent blog, *Self-Publishing Scams: Keep the "Self" in Self-Publishing*, 'The very notion of a self-publishing company is an oxymoron' (my emphasis: an **oxymoron** is a contradiction).

Just as no one but you can have 'self-control', undertake 'self-help' activities, be 'self-centred' or 'self-conscious', no one but you can self-publish your book!

To self-publish means you are the author **and** the

publisher of your book. You may hire a graphic designer to do the layout and the cover for you, or even hire an author services company to do certain aspects of the process for you, but that doesn't change the fact that you are the publisher, no one else.

There are many reputable author services businesses, including multinational companies – even if they do call themselves self-publishers when they're not!

But before you head down the path of publishing your own book, it is vital that you do thorough research into what's involved in self-publishing. As the old adage goes, forewarned is forearmed.

Do it yourself

To keep it simple, I've broken the process of self-publishing a book into six main steps. I have not included promotion and distribution.

1. Book layout and cover (front and back cover).
2. Name for publishing business.
3. ISBN (and barcode if producing a print book).
4. Prepublication Data Service.
5. Printing your book (if producing a print book).
6. Legal deposit.

Book layout and cover

There are many graphic design and book layout businesses, so it's a bit of a minefield knowing who to choose.

Bonus Chapter - Self Publishing Your Book

Read the section *Book cover* below.

(If you're a graphic designer or you have a friend or family member who's a graphic designer or adept at book layout software, then you're lucky and you don't need to read this section. Skip to the heading *ISBN*.)

Recommendations are gold

If at all possible, obtain a recommendation from someone who's already self-published a book and who was happy with their designer.

Research

If you can't obtain a recommendation, then Google a variety of book designers/graphic artists. Read their customer reviews.

A handy checklist

Here are some things to take into consideration, and questions to ask the designers you are approaching initially.

- Check on their website the book covers they have done for previous clients. A legitimate designer will be keen to showcase their work.
- Positive customer reviews on their website.
- Ease of getting hold of them initially.
- Ask to speak to the 'boss', the person in charge of the business. Make sure they seem enthusiastic about your project.
- Ease of communication (do they communicate clearly, share information freely).
- Price.
- Package inclusions (applies if they're doing more than just the cover and layout).

- Flexibility of packages – can you tailor to your heart's content, or are you restricted by what they are prepared to change (applies if they're doing more than just the cover and layout).
- Make sure they have no claim on future sales.
- Make sure they are not promising worthless promotions for excessive costs (applies if they're doing more than just the cover and layout).
- Ask what help and support they offer.
- Ask what aspects of the process they expect you to do, i.e. where they provide little help or support (applies if they're doing more than just the cover and layout).
- Timeline – how long it will take.

One final thing: once your book is laid out, the designer will send you a proof copy of your book for proofreading. Before proceeding to printing, make sure you do a thorough proofread of the book and the front and back cover, or hire a professional proofreader to do so, as errors can slip in during the design process.

Name for your publishing business

Decide on a name for your publishing business. You'll need this for registering the ISBN. It will be included on the imprint page of your book (the page on the back of the title page).

It's best to give this some thought. Make it appealing. Don't use your name, unless you've got an appealing sounding name! Keep it concise. Then, it's wise to Google it to make sure it's not already taken. You'll be surprised.

Bonus Chapter - Self Publishing Your Book

ISBN



One of the features of being a self-publisher is that *you* purchase the ISBN for your book. ISBN stands for 'International Standard Book Number'. It is a unique numeric commercial book identifier, allowing your book to be searched internationally. More specifically, the ISBN is 'used by publishers, booksellers, libraries, internet retailers and other supply chain participants for ordering, listing, sales records and stock control purposes' (International ISBN Agency).

Current ISBNs are 13 digits long. As a self-publisher, you buy an ISBN from an affiliate of the International ISBN Agency. In Australia, that's Thorpe-Bowker.

At time of publication, a single ISBN in Australia cost \$44. You also pay a one-time new publisher's fee of \$55.

If you are producing a print book you will also need a barcode. The picture above shows both the barcode and the ISBN. You can purchase an ISBN/barcode combo from Thorpe-Bowker for around \$90.

Prepublication Data Service (National Library of Australia)

The Prepublication Data Service (previously known as CiP or Cataloguing in Publication) is a *free* service offered by the National Library of Australia (NLA).

The service is for Australian publishers and self-publishers who want the details of their upcoming publications made available to Australian libraries, library suppliers, booksellers and the public. These entities can then search for upcoming titles, facilitating their ordering process. What does this mean for you? It means that your book can be searched for and potentially ordered once it's published.

When your application is completed, the NLA will email you a logo to include on the copyright page of your book.

Note: You need to have purchased your ISBN in order to complete the prepublication data service process.

The process of registering for the Prepublication Data Service is simple and straightforward.

Printing your book

If you are producing an eBook, you can disregard this step.

If the printing world is an unknown to you, I would encourage you to find a reputable and knowledgeable print broker, or print manager, rather than going direct to printers for quotations. Chances are, the intricacies of the process won't be explained to you by the printers, and they may come up with their best price, but the finished product may not have the look or be of the quality that you had imagined. They may only ask 'how many copies' and 'what paper stock do you want', but as I discovered recently, there's a lot more to it than that.

My daughter and I recently met with a print manager to discuss the print version of her book. It is a cookbook with over 200 pages containing coloured photos and images on every page. Obviously, this is more complicated and costlier than printing a novel.

It made us realise how important it is to work with someone who knows the print business intimately and

Bonus Chapter - Self Publishing Your Book

who can steer you in the right direction before you veer too far in the wrong direction! Aside from advice on paper options, paper quality, printing options, order quantities and the rest, the job of a print broker/manager is to obtain the best quotation for you. They do this by approaching several printers on your behalf.

Legal deposit

You make a legal deposit for your book after it has been published.

Legal deposit is a free service provided by the National Library of Australia. It is a requirement under the Copyright Act 1968.

Legal deposit applies to any Australian person, group or organisation that makes this material available to the public for sale or for free
—National Library of Australia

The legal deposit process is simple and straightforward.

Contract an author services company

If you prefer to hand your book over to an author services company to handle most of the self-publishing process for you, then read this section carefully.

A handy checklist

First, read *A handy checklist* above, as all these points apply to contracting an author services company.

Their services vary

The services offered by author services companies vary widely. Some arrange all the above for you – except for applying for the ISBN of course, as explained above. The more services you choose, the

more it will cost. It's about balancing convenience against cost.

Book cover

You need to have a good idea of how you would like your cover to look. If you have absolutely no idea, it's going to be hard for the designer. They won't read your book to see what it's about – yes, that's right, and you can't expect them to have the time to do so. Whatever you can provide in the way of pictures, photos, ideas in your head, will help the designer move from vague to concrete and enable them to provide you with a couple of different options.

Make sure to ask as many questions as you want so that you are fully informed about the process.

Research, research, research

As Don, one of my clients advises, 'Research, research and then research some more!'

I have learned through the process that first-time authors are a target due to their ignorance of the process. There are definitely scammers out there ready to take advantage
—Don, editors4you client

Don says, 'I read review after review using different search terms. Sometimes, negative reviews would appear if I searched "first time author", rather than "publishing services".'

This forms your 'due diligence' – checking and confirming the authenticity of the provider of publishing services. If the reviews seem genuine, then contact them for a quotation. You'll soon weed out the ones who show no interest or who you don't relate to, and then ideally you'll end up with two that you can ask more incisive questions of.

While it's satisfying to support a local business, the main requirement is that they're going to work well

Bonus Chapter - Self Publishing Your Book

with you and they're going to do an excellent job. If the designer you choose isn't local to you, be prepared to communicate by phone and email.

Credits and resources

ISBN

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Thorpe-Bowker Identifier Services, <https://www.myidentifiers.com.au/Get-your-isbn-now>

Legal Deposit

National Library of Australia, What is Legal Deposit? <https://www.nla.gov.au/legal-deposit/what-is-legal-deposit>

Pre-Publication Data Service

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About The Author

Gail Tagarro is a writing coach and Accredited Editor (Institute of Professional Editors).

She holds a Master of Arts in English and Spanish Linguistics, and a Diploma in News Journalism.

She has worked as a journalist, technical writing consultant, TESOL teacher, translator, editor, and freelance writer.

She lives on the Gold Coast in Queensland, Australia, with her family.

Other Publications by the Author

Non-fiction:

Everything You Need to Know About How to Self-Publish Your Book (2019)

How to Format your Manuscript before Editing and Save (2014)

Spain: A Travel Narrative (coming in 2019)

Short stories:

Painful Amore (2004; published 2019)

The Shed (1999; published 2019)

Tom's Boring Day (1999; published 2019)

Novels:

Chopin (coming in 2019)