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☆2009 Book of the Year Royal Palm Award (Florida Writers)
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DON'T SABOTAGE YOUR SUBMISSION

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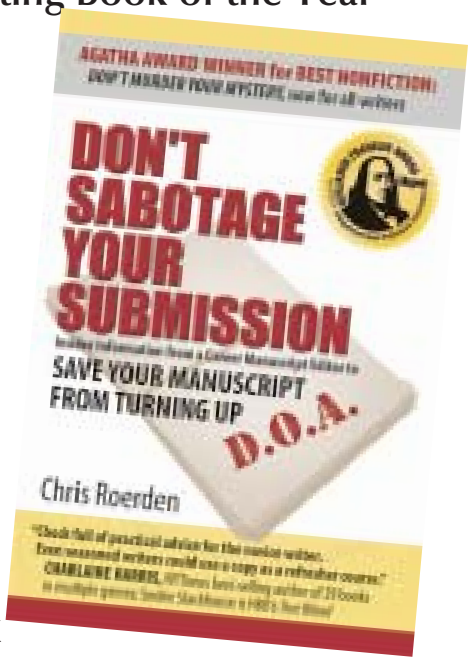

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Expanded? What does "Expanded" mean?

It means 130 new examples in addition to 100 of the 140 original examples from *Don't Murder Your Mystery*. Now, 230 positive examples of effective writing technique demonstrate how 215 authors get right what the average writer gets wrong. Same clues. Also new: Internal dialogue. For a list of authors reviewed, keep scrolling.

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—JOHN N. THORNBURG, Professor of English/Creative Writing, San Jacinto College

Ask a question or leave an email message for Chris at: chrisroerden@writersinfo.info

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1. Fiction—Technique. 2. Editing. I. Title.

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DEDICATION

To the writers, already published
and still submitting, who have
trusted their best efforts to me
and asked for assistance:

You taught me what you need.

This book is one way I can show
my gratitude for your trust and
pay it forward.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PRECAUTIONS

For long-lasting benefits, apply this remedy to drafts that have finished digesting. Attempting to revise while still writing, like exercising while eating, may shut down the body's flow of creative juices and produce verbal constipation.

Double vision and intermittent paralysis of the hands are signs of early self-editing disorder, which may be alleviated by rest and large doses of Dorothy Cannell.

Minor irritants include a pain in the neck and discomfort in the shoulder, as if an editor were looking over it. Severe cases are marked by schizophrenia, in which writers hear voices of critiquers that temporarily smother one's own voice.

Use caution when applying any writing remedy.

NOT ABOUT RULES

Despite my parody of a prescription warning, I don't call myself a book doctor. To me, the term implies that a writer's work is sick. Neither do I talk about writing as good or bad, right or wrong. That presupposes rules. This book is not about rules. It's about effectiveness.

What counts in any work of fiction—whether literary fiction or genre (a.k.a. category) fiction—is its effect on the reader. Content is important, but technique is the means by which that content creates its effect. Some techniques are more effective than others; some, less effective.

For more than forty-four years, editing has been my full-time day job. I love my job, but I am saddened by witnessing, year after year, the same ineffective writing habits continuing to sabotage one submission after another.

Though my own focus in this book is on genre fiction, my goal is to help *all* writers:

1. find and fix the clues to the ineffective use of key techniques;
2. survive the first cut of the submission process so plot and characters can get a fair reading.

Why send a manuscript off to self-destruct?

D.O.A.

PART I: DEAD ON ARRIVAL

"Idealistic young scribes who insist their work is for them alone will disagree, but a writer without readers is like shouting in an empty room."

Leonard Pitts Jr., syndicated columnist [1]

JUDGE AND JURY

Remember when you first learned to identify spam in your email? Once you realized what it was, the clues seemed to fall into place: senders you didn't know and subject lines with unrealistic promises: "Lose fat while sleeping," "Your tax refund" (fat chance), and "I found your wallet." You learned to spot the clues quickly, didn't you?

Me too. In fact, anyone who knows me would know I'd never fall for anything resembling "URGENT RESPONSE NEEDED!!!" or any offer that for me is anatomically impossible.

And how about those telemarketers? Once you learned how to spot their calls, you cut them off after hearing only the start of their pitch. Now you get rid of calls and emails the moment you see the first clue.

The same quick decision-making applies to most submissions that flood literary agencies and publishing houses every day. In the same way that you developed your own shortcuts for rapidly screening spammers and telemarketers, the publishing industry developed its own shortcuts for rapidly screening manuscript submissions.

One form of flood control is the literary agency, the industry's first responder. Whether your manuscript lands in a pile at an agency or a pile at a publishing house, the screening process is essentially the same. An

3

optimist known as the first reader, or "the reader," has the job of lowering the leaning tower of printouts as efficiently as possible—all the while hoping to rescue the rare beauty imprisoned within.

Readers work rapidly, spotting the clues that separate the manuscripts with no chance of publication from those that may deserve a second look. Gatekeepers know what to screen for. More accurately, they know what to screen *out.* We might as well call them by their function: screener-outers.

The piles of submissions are large; made larger still by multiple copies of the same manuscripts making the rounds of agents and royalty publishers all across the country. Think what's involved in simply handling those millions of manuscripts, much less attempting to actually *read* them. Some of us can barely handle a day's worth of spam.

SPEEDY EXECUTION

When busy screeners pick up your 12-point Courier, double-spaced, laser-printed, return-receipted priority-posted submission, they do what you and I do when we log on to our email or pick up a ringing phone. We become alert for the earliest clue enabling us to reject, ASAP, whatever someone else is selling that doesn't interest us.

"Despite the statistics that we are a country suffering from functional illiteracy, we seem to be producing an extraordinary number of imaginative, interesting writers. The problem is that they can't get anyone to read what they write."

Rayanna Simons, about her four years as first reader for Macmillan[2]

At this make-or-break moment in which a first impression is the only impression, appearance is everything. Submissions that merely *look* unprofessional get shoved back in the box or the bubble wrap, unread.

Because appearance involves mechanics, not writing skill, you can find information about formatting at the end of this book in Exhibit A of the POST-MORTEM.

Another rapid disqualifier of submissions is wrong category or genre. A sci-fi/fantasy house won't buy a cozy mystery, no matter how well written. A literary press won't redirect its editorial and marketing strategies to publish a vampire romance, no matter how cleverly crafted. For your novel to reach the audience most likely to buy it, your submission must aim for the publishing pros who court the same market you do.

Just as you recognize which over-the-phone and email offers don't interest you, agents and publishers recognize which genres don't interest them. It's up to you to research who is interested in what. Check the guidelines agents and publishers post on their websites and happily send to you for the courtesy of a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE). Then:

1. Follow each agent's or publisher's guidelines, even if the variations from one to another seem minor.
2. Send your work to only those agencies or publishing houses that state an interest in your genre.
3. Identify the category or genre in your cover letter, and your subgenre if you know it.

A surprisingly large number of writers submit their work to anyone in publishing whose address they happen to come across. *My spy thriller is so good,* thinks the aspiring writer, *surely every publisher will want it.*

Nonsense. Disregarding the stated preferences of agents and royalty publishers ensures that a submission will be dead on arrival, proof that the writer is an amateur. (Because matching a manuscript to the interests of its recipient involves common sense, not writing skill, you can find information about genres among the sources listed at the back of this book. See Exhibit B of the POST-MORTEM under writing category fiction.)[3]

A GOOD FIT

If your manuscript passes the qualifying trials of mechanics and category, it becomes eligible for the opening round of the main event. That's where your submission has its first and often *only* chance of being read. That's where your writing skills are judged—rapidly, often hastily. The process is publishing's version of the survivor-based reality show.

For an agent to represent you, your submission must be a good fit for the agency. For an acquisitions editor to offer a contract, your submission must be a good fit for the publishing house.

You might scoff at the words "good fit," hearing them as weasel words.

Whatever those people want to call it, you say, *I know rejection when I get it.*

Without discounting or denying any writer's feelings of rejection, I offer a view of the process from another perspective:

TIP: THE FITTING ROOM—A PARABLE

Let's say you need a new pair of slacks. When you walk into your favorite emporium, aren't you eliminating all the merchandise offered by every other store—at least for the time being? Is that not rejection?

Maybe it's simply prioritizing, like an agent's shifting some manuscripts to the bottom of the reading pile to look at later.

On entering the first store, you ignore half the clothing solely because it's intended for the opposite sex. You also walk past jewelry, shoes, toys, and hardware *without even looking at what they have to offer.* Is that not rejection?

When you arrive at sportswear, you brush past racks of slacks with budget-busting prices and sizes from a past life. Nothing is wrong with these armies of garments; they simply don't fit your needs—like the millions of manuscripts that don't fit the needs of every agent or publisher.

Fast-forward to the fitting room. You're about to try on six promising selections—not unlike the agent who asks to see a full manuscript based on a promising first chapter.

If none of the try-ons fits well enough to buy, you will visit another store and begin the rejection process over. But one pair of slacks happens to fit just right, so you leave the other five candidates hanging in the dressing room, pay for your purchase, and head home.

There, crammed into your mail slot, sits one of your own self-addressed stamped envelopes. Your novel has come home—again. You can feel rejected, or you can feel one step closer to finding the agency or publishing house where both of you are the right fit for each other.

You slip into your new slacks, check your email, and browse the latest postings on your favorite writers' list serve. One online subscriber is asking, "Why did they ask for my whole manuscript if they were only going to reject it?"

At that moment, thousands of underpaid department-store clerks are cleaning out fitting rooms from coast to coast, grumbling, "Why do they take so many clothes to try on if they're going to buy only one?" [4]

SUDDEN DEATH

The manuscript that's always a poor fit is one that seems unlikely to sell enough copies to push a publisher's revenues well above the break-even point. What does sell, other than a celebrity name? Enthusiasm! Booksellers telling readers, "Here's an author you'll enjoy," and all of us readers telling our friends and librarians, "This is a terrific book! Get it!"

That's word-of-mouth. That's "buzz." It sells boocoodle books.

The promise of success begins with the enthusiasm that a manuscript generates in wary literary agents, cautious acquisitions editors, and skeptical marketing and accounting decision-makers.

Mild interest doesn't sell books. Wild interest does.

I know, I know—the industry is famously poor at predicting the success of the titles it releases. High-advance celebrity books lose tons of money, while best-selling authors admit to many early years of rejection.

In spite of cloudy crystal balls, publishing pros do foresee with some accuracy one type of failure: average writing. They call it "amateur."

As unkind as this word sounds, "amateur" is used throughout the industry to distinguish the average writer from the professional: the one in a hundred whose writing shows that she or he has studied the craft, practiced it, and appears able to make money at it.

Sadly, most submissions deserve the amateur label. That's why the industry's first readers must be efficient screener-outers. The sooner they spot a clue to average writing, the sooner they can go on to the next piece. Before you can say give my piece a chance, it goes from the slush pile to the "no" pile. Practically unread.

"No" is a rapid decision based primarily on the craft and voice heard at the start of a manuscript's pitch. You may have spent a year or more in labor to bring your 400-page bundle of joy to life, but your effort miscarries. And you don't know why. So you keep looking for the one agent or publisher who will listen to what your submission has to say.

But all are alert to the same clues.

It doesn't matter that your plot and subplots weave suspensefully from beginning to end. Few manuscripts are read far enough for the plot to reveal itself. It doesn't matter how skillfully you develop the relationship between protagonist and antagonist. Screener-outers don't hang in there long enough to see how you develop your characters.

A manuscript screener is the quicker picker-upper: a professional reader who picks up the earliest clues that separate the amateurs from the pros.

What are those clues? That's what this book is all about. If you already know how publishing decisions are made, skip ahead to CLUE #1.

A REPRIEVE

No doubt you've seen works of fiction that make you wonder how they ever made it into print. The reaction "I can do better than that" probably spawns more new writers than all the writers conferences put together.

As your own reading proves, not every piece of writing deserving of obscurity is rewarded with it. There's an exception to everything.

Luck may play a part, though few writers care to pin their hopes on being picked from fortune's fickle barrel. Most want to do everything they can to improve their manuscripts to survive that first, often *only* screen test, by a screener-outer who is the publishing police, judge, and executioner rolled into one.

Cruel? After years of rejecting manuscripts for the identical writing habits, even the kindest, most optimistic agents and acquisitions editors cannot help but feel cruelly treated by those who expect to enter a skilled profession without learning its craft.

With more self-improvement resources available today than ever before, publishing pros wonder how writers can remain oblivious to the many ways they sabotage their own submissions.

"We write all these books, how-to articles, and blogs," they groan. "We travel coast to coast giving workshops and telling writers what to do and what not to do. Are these efforts making a difference? No," they moan. "Our offices are still being flooded with the same kind of amateur submissions."

To deal with the deluge, agencies and publishers respond with brief form letters or postcards saying thanks-but-no-thanks, here's wishing you success . . . elsewhere.

If you receive one of those "elsewhere" advisories, you might feel like spending the rest of the day lying on your couch in a blue funk.

"How could they reject my story," you cry. "What do those people *want?"*

D.O.A.

PLAINTIFFS

Before we look at what publishers want, take a few moments—since you're stretched out on the couch anyway—to contemplate a want of your own. An end to those unsaintly "elsewhere" notes? That, too. What I have in mind, though, is the secret desire that lurks deep in the unconscious of the unhappily unpublished.

Like many who yearn for publication, you may be nurturing a dream in which your manuscript lands on the desk of a kindly benefactor able to look past any rough edges and recognize raw, undeveloped talent. This visionary is so taken by your *potential* that he or she shows you how to fix whatever little flaws might be getting in the way of your success.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to encounter a nurturing mentor willing to mold you into the accomplished writer you know you can become?

Like any fantasy, this secret desire is based on an unreal premise—the result, perhaps, of growing up with all those inspiring biographies in the school library that told of misunderstood geniuses who struggled and eventually made good.

Biographies are by definition inspiring. Who wants to read of the shlimazel who hasn't succeeded at *something?*

In publishing, mentors and fairy godparents exist, but they are rare. Teaching writers their craft is not the job of an agent or a publisher's in-house editor.

> "[P]eople tend to think, I can take this horrible mess of a manuscript to a benevolent genius who is going to turn it into a masterpiece and teach me how to write. The function of the [in-house] editor is not to run a writing school; it is to edit and publish books."
>
> Justin Kaplan, editor of *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*[5]

CALCULATED GAMBLE

Royalty publishers are professional gamblers. They bet on an acquisition's netting a large enough profit to make their risk worthwhile—larger by far than their outlay for production, marketing, distribution, and the author's modest advance and equally modest royalty.

Agents are risk-takers, too. They gamble on an acquisition's generating a large enough advance plus royalties to produce a meaningful commission. Other than that large commission and small reimbursements for postage and photocopying, professional agents are not paid for the time they invest in seeking homes for the work they represent. Nor should they be.

Therefore, if these risk-takers believe their projected ROI (return on investment) will be modest, a reasonably well-written manuscript that generates mild but not wild enthusiasm is unlikely to attract either an agent or a publisher, *even when nothing is wrong with it.*

Moreover, if this nicely written manuscript does get published and nets only a small profit, that profit will be seen as a loss. To understand this paradox, we have to consider what's known in all business ventures as the *opportunity cost*—more accurately, the *lost* opportunity cost. That is, an investor's decision to put resources behind Book A means not investing in Book B—and Book B *might have yielded a higher profit.*

So you can see why agents and publishers must feel passionate about a new writer's chances for success before risking time and resources on an unknown. This reality applies equally to the mid-list writer who is eventually convinced by unspectacular sales to start fresh under a pseudonym.

How often do you feel passionate enough to gamble your time and money on the future of a stranger? For agents and royalty publishers, gambling is a given—unlike those whose job is to help writers learn their craft, such as the professional writing instructor, coach, or independent manuscript editor. These fee-for-service providers are paid at the time they render their professional services. Now that publishers no longer subsidize the editorial costs they once did, the burden of who pays for editing has shifted to the writer, who is expected to do whatever it takes to come up with a highly polished, profitably publishable manuscript.

Writers serious about their work are well advised to put aside their fantasies, get up from the couch, and learn as much as possible about the craft of writing *before* subjecting themselves to near-certain disappointment.

D.O.A.

DEFENDANTS

We can now look at what publishers want. Writers are always being told, write what *you* want, not what you think publishers want, unless you're a writer for hire. "The first person you should think of pleasing, in writing a book, is yourself," advised best-selling author Patricia Highsmith. She felt strongly enough about this issue to put it on page 1 of her classic *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction.*

However, Highsmith and others are not saying write in whatever way you want. They are saying don't try to second-guess the next trend. "Are they still buying cozies?" asks the *trendinista.* "Has the serial killer been overdone?" "Paranormal romance seems hot right now. Maybe I'll try it."

Pleasing yourself applies to selecting your genres and topics. It does not apply to writing well, which never goes out of style.[6]

Comments that occasionally accompany a returned manuscript sometimes tell what a specific agent or publisher is looking for.[7]

> "What's sought is a fresh voice, a magical individuality that is both unique and indefinable. . . ."

Magical? Indefinable? Maybe the next rejection letter is more helpful:

> "We are always looking for the writer with that extra pizzazz."

Is this any clearer? Stay tuned—we place our order for pizzazz later.

BACK TO BASICS

To review, publishing is a profit-driven business based on a gamble in which the odds favor no one. Most new titles have short, unprofitable shelf lives of twelve to thirteen weeks. Most lose money, their losses offset by the earnings of the few titles that do exceptionally well.

How many other industries turn out between 65,000 and 100,000 different products every year? Only a small number of these titles bring in extra income by being reissued in film, paperback, and foreign reprints. Note that book revenue comes from *new* units sold. Not a penny from the huge market in used books goes to the producers: authors, agents, or publishers. (Raise your hand if you buy only brand new books. I thought so.)

Because the goal is to get through the pile, literary agent Noah Lukeman says that agents and editors read solely with an eye to dismiss a manuscript.[8]

In contrast, Hollywood produces a little over 300 films a year for theatrical release,[9] which earn residuals whenever they are licensed for TV, video, and DVD *whether or not the original did well at the box office.* Furthermore, film has no competition from sales of used movie tickets.

These realities force the publishing industry's risk-takers to select manuscripts likely to spill less red ink than previous gambles. That's why the odds-pickers attempt to maximize the sales potential of their already-established high earners, and to:

A. cut further losses by dropping existing authors whose sales are less than stellar;
B. minimize risks by taking on a small number of new writers who look like sure winners; and
C. ignore the rest, especially those whose writing skills are average.

Everything else that can be said about publishing is based on these ABCs. The industry cannot afford to gamble on writers who are still developing their potential, show little evidence of having studied the craft of the profession they aspire to, or don't follow the submission guidelines that publishers and agents make available. At times, guidelines serve as a screening device to identify writers who don't or won't follow instructions.

TIPSHEETS

Submission guidelines are also known as tipsheets. These specify each recipient's genres handled, preferences for querying and submitting, policy on multiple submissions, interest in a synopsis, number of pages to send, and many other dos and don'ts.

Advice and opinions on the pros and cons of what to send and how to write that all-important query letter are available in dozens of excellent books, magazines, and blogs for writers. Because that information is plentiful, and because the writing skills needed to produce nonfiction marketing materials are not the same as the skills needed to create a work of fiction, I do not cover marketing. Instead, you can find pre-publication and post-publication resources listed among the recommended nonfiction titles and popular Internet sites at the back of this book (in Exhibits B and C of the POST-MORTEM).

Jason Epstein, publisher of Anchor Books and a founder of the *New York Review of Books,* writes that when he got his start in publishing at Doubleday, for several weeks he was given no further assignment than to read unsolicited manuscripts, which he soon learned could be "disposed of on the evidence of a paragraph or two."[10]

Often, submission guidelines mention the need for fresh characters, plausible plots, and lively dialogue. They do not tell you how to correct implausible plots, avoid stale characters, and eliminate other signs of average writing. That's not the job of a tipsheet. It's the writer's job.

The responsibility is also yours for delivering the indefinable magic and pizzazz.

Your most valuable resource for learning the craft of writing is the work of other authors. Steep yourself in fiction and nonfiction of all kinds. Read and reread the authors you feel an affinity for and study their techniques. Analyze the way they set a scene, construct dialogue, develop characters, and build suspense.

The advantage of reading a novel or a short story for the second or third time is that you avoid getting caught up in questions of what happens next, thereby freeing yourself to concentrate on the how-to of creating the effects you admire.

Effective techniques, when added to your own natural ability to spin a great story, prepare you to give publishers what they are really looking for: good writing.

BEYOND TIPSHEETS

1. Join organizations of writers, attend their meetings and conferences, and participate in their online discussions. (For popular Internet sites for writers, see Exhibit C of the POST-MORTEM.)
2. Take courses on technique at local colleges and online. To learn which courses are worthwhile, ask your online discussion buddies.
3. Join a local support group for writers or an online critique group—or start one. Some writers find such groups extremely helpful; others find them taking time and energy that could better be used for writing. (There's a reason that Milwaukee's Redbird Studios has a waiting list for its "Shut Up and Write" program.)
4. If possible, work with a professional writing coach or personal editor to build your writing strengths, identify your weaknesses, and produce a manuscript with promise.
5. Read books about the craft of writing—and not merely one or two, because no book, including this one, has all the answers. Advice ranges from how to write and market your book to how to edit it, and from "My way is the only way" to "See all the options you have."
6. Read novels in your genre and other genres, and soak up the sound of good writing.
7. Keep returning to the quick FIND & FIX checklists throughout this book. And don't hesitate to write in the margins, highlight, put sticky-notes wherever you want to, and add your own listings to the index of topics you want to return to again.

D.O.A.

CORRECTION FACILITIES

Now that we've considered a few fundamentals that drive the publishing business, we can look at what you have some control over. Whether you love revising or hate it, revision is where a writer's craft shows itself—where the real writing takes place. Step 1 is to put your completed first draft aside for a week or a month to gain a fresh perspective on it. The longer its forced exile, the fresher your vision.

In Step 2, some writers read only for plot on their first pass through, taking notes but making no corrections. On their next pass, they focus only on characters. They recommend reading for specific elements on each subsequent pass. Why work over the phrasing of a sentence when the whole scene might be dumped?

Other writers revise each scene before writing the next one, reviewing where they've been so they know where they're heading. Only when the first draft is finished and brought out of exile do they begin at page 1 and make several complete revision passes through the whole, as needed.

Both approaches have merit, as do other methods. What works for you depends on your own experience with writing a full-length novel. First-timers can benefit from trying several methods, because I strongly advocate revising, revising, revising.

Between revisions put your manuscript out of sight and read a good novel. Let the voices of skilled writers refresh your hearing and expand your sensibilities. The moment you feel inspired to let your own voice resound, stop reading and start revising again.

Author of *The Sterile Cuckoo,* John Nichols, talks of writing his first draft very quickly, then rewriting and rewriting—loving the process. For him, "really writing" is that final stage in which he dwells on lines and words.[11]

Without these mind-cleansing interludes, a too-frequent self-edit of your draft can counteract the fresh approach gained by its temporary exile.

If you reach revision overload, try an about-face. Work your way from the last scene to the first. A change in sequence breaks the continuity of the plot and keeps you from missing the same weaknesses again. This altered perspective can reveal scenes that go nowhere, plus action, dialogue, and characters who contribute nothing. Whatever works for you, go for it.

NO "RIGHT WAY"

When the subject of revision comes up at writing conferences, some workshop leaders who are also successful authors put forth their way as "The Right Way." This makes me uncomfortable, because the audience is filled with writers eager to believe that all advice from an author who glitters is gospel. When aspiring writers, already insecure, realize they aren't doing things the way they think a *real* author is supposed to, they have one more reason to feel inadequate.

The truth is, no one way is the right way. Revising, like writing, is a creative process, too complex to reduce to a formula. As convinced of this truth as I am, I was nonetheless gratified to come across support for it from the award-winning novelist Jan Burke. Her essay "Revision" appears in *Writing Mysteries,* the Mystery Writers of America handbook edited by Sue Grafton:

> "Revision is one more process through which each writer must find his or her own way, and while it may take some time and experimentation to learn what method works best for you, mastering this part of the craft of writing will be well worth it."
>
> [p. 182]

Revise as much as you can before submitting your manuscript. Do the same even when the only one looking at your draft is your personal editor, critique partner, or writing coach.

Wait a minute—if you hire your own editor can't you expect that person to find and fix all those little details? Yes, and many editors do just that, but most are able to see the forest *and* the trees more clearly if you first hack away at the underbrush and dead stumps. It's a fact: certain issues become evident only as smaller obstructions are removed. To get the most from any editor, provide the cleanest manuscript you can.

The more problems you can keep from murdering your manuscript, the more attention a writing coach or editor can pay to these two necessities:

- helping you overcome the weaknesses invisible to a critique group and to you, the only *self*-editor, and
- reinforcing your writing strengths.

The professional editor takes no pleasure in fixing what you can be taught to find and fix yourself. By mastering the dozens of techniques in this book, you save your manuscript from instant rejection, improve its chances of being *read,* and enable those who edit your work to focus on the subtler challenges that help you grow as a writer. Professional editors get a kick out of witnessing the development of new talent. I know I do.

THE BIG STUFF

Chances are you've been concentrating on developing your characters, weaving your plot and subplots, and refining other large-scale, whole-book concepts. These big-picture elements comprise your manuscript's content—what your novel is *about.* Slight one and you have no story.

Those large-scale concepts are not what I deal with in this book. One reason is that many other resources do precisely that (see Exhibit B of the POST-MORTEM).

Another reason is that handling large-scale issues in a book involves talking about general principles, but general principles are not easy to apply to one's own writing.

> "Most cuts are made in the first three pages. The 'yes' pile is cut two more times."
>
> Barbara Gislason, literary agent[12]

Third, many writers expect the agents and editors who read their work to view plot and character as the key to publication. That may be true for submissions that reach the higher levels of decision-making, but for the majority of manuscripts, the first reader rejects the quality of the writing long before reading far enough to evaluate the development of your plot or characters.

This reality is my main reason for not dealing with a novel's whole-book concepts. As you now realize, the most efficient way for the readers at agencies and publishing houses to process mountains of submissions is to stop reading at the earliest clues to average writing.

THE SMALL STUFF

Unlike large-scale, whole-book elements, the small stuff in writing deals with formatting and what I call PUGS: punctuation, usage, grammar, and spelling. I don't cover mechanics in this book, either, though such details are critical to getting read. Making errors in grammar or spelling, or failing to mirror formatting preferences, gives busy screener-outers the first clue and often the only reason to be able to say, "Whew! Another four-pounder I don't have to read."

Why offer your first reader an invitation to quickly reject your work?

Most editors-for-hire do a decent job of cleaning up PUGS for you. Scores of books and magazines advise you about format and other mechanics (e.g., p. 284), as do the free tipsheets from publishers and agents.

All tipsheets are similar but not identical, so customize your every submission to meet the requirements of each recipient. Evidence of a writer's ignoring a specification could annoy the screener, disqualify a submission immediately, or peg the writer as careless or a prima donna. No publishing pro wants a long-term relationship with a high-maintenance author.

IN THE MIDDLE

Between the large-scale elements of plot and character, and the small-scale PUGS and mechanics, a large middle ground exists. That's my focus in this book, because my goal is to give you a fair chance at getting your manuscript past its hasty initial screening to actually being *read.*

Picture a pyramid. Its base represents the major whole-book concepts that call for macro-editing. This is the province of acquisitions and developmental editors. The top of the pyramid represents the small stuff that demands the finicky, narrowly focused approach of micro-editing. This is the province of copy editors and proofreaders.

In that broad middle ground between the pyramid's base and its apex lies the wide-ranging province of the line editor. Line editing encompasses large areas of

"Never start a sentence with a comma." That's the only rule in publishing, said Bill Brohaugh, former editorial director for Writer's Digest Books, speaking at a Mid-America Publishers Association conference. "Everything after that is up for discussion."[13]

both developmental editing and copy editing, but it is especially attuned to helping writers shape their techniques and sharpen their writing skills.

WHY THESE CLUES

You and I know that creating a publishable manuscript goes well beyond the ability to master several dozen writing techniques. Though some aspects of craft are more important than others, any technique used ineffectively is a dead giveaway to the kind of writing that is merely average.

Ineffective, average techniques share these characteristics:

1. Their use—or rather, misuse—is pervasive throughout a manuscript as well as throughout the typical stack of submissions. The resulting voice makes ninety percent of all manuscripts sound as if they were written by the same person. That's why I call it average writing. It may have been good enough to earn A and B-plus in high school and college, but it's not professional enough for commercial publication.
2. Clues to ineffective techniques remain invisible to most writers until pointed out. Pointing them out is exactly what I am about to do.
3. The same clues are equally invisible to one's writing buddies, who usually address the big stuff, and to the English major in everyone's life, who tends to tinker with the small stuff. (Take no offense, please; I'm a former English major and a life member of Tinkerers Anonymous.)
4. Screener-outers learn to spot the clues to average writing immediately.

And now for the good news...

5. Clues to the problem techniques I analyze are relatively easy to learn, and to find and fix. So easy that you'll forget where you read them.

ABOUT THE EXAMPLES

What follows are 230 excerpts from more than 215 writers working in a dozen different genres. Together, you and I shall analyze how those writers successfully dealt with the techniques that challenge every writer.

As often as possible, I present excerpts from first novels and stories because I believe a developing writer might identify more readily with others at the beginning of *their* publishing careers.

Every passage bearing an author's name is offered as a positive example of a specific technique. The few negative, nameless ones I wrote, using the identical phrasing that I encounter repeatedly in manuscripts. Only the identifying details are changed, because I have no wish to embarrass anyone. Writing is difficult enough, and the professional skills a writer must demonstrate to be taken seriously in a highly competitive marketplace require a long and challenging process to develop—much longer and more difficult than the new writer imagines.

All the excerpts I quote make up my show and tell. The rest is opinion, mostly mine, based on a lifetime of editing, coaching, teaching, reading.

I do not expect you to agree with every one of my opinions or admire every example I review. In fact, the wording of some excerpts could be improved. However, I chose each because it is a good example of a particular technique that I'd like every writer to be aware of.

Some caveats:

- I don't claim to know what effect an author intended—only the effect on me and what my years in publishing have shown me is the effect on others.
- By offering specific examples that I find particularly effective, I am not necessarily endorsing the books from which they come or all the techniques within their pages.
- Each selection I review is meant to stimulate your imagination and inspire your experimentation, not imitation.
- In no way am I laying down *rules.* In fiction, there are no absolutes. There are, however, guidelines.

What's more, in all things editorial:

- No solution is right for every situation. Evaluate my suggestions in relation to what is most appropriate for your own work.
- There's an exception to everything—a caveat that bears repeating.
- The choices are always yours, no matter what I or any editor recommends at any stage of your manuscript's development.

THIS 20-PAGE EXCERPT ENDS HERE and jumps forward to one of the 6 RESOURCE LISTS FOUND at the BACK of the BOOK

Note: *DON'T SABOTAGE YOUR SUBMISSION* **analyzes 230 examples of positive techniques to demonstrate how 215 authors do effectively what the average writer does not. Here are those featured authors and their books:**

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