

Novel Writing

by Jack English

001 Grit McGuffin Characters

What does it take to write a novel? Having written 21 novels, I have learned a thing or two about novel writing.

First, it requires grit and determination. Most novels are 80,000 to 100,000 words. Writing of that length is never done in a week, and often requires months of writing, editing and re-writing.

Second, a novel requires a McGuffin, a thing the novel is about. In my Sci-Fi novel *Abandoned* the McGuffin is a guy left on a crippled spaceship after the last shuttle leaves. *Sunken Island* is about a woman who inherits an island full of secrets from a long-lost uncle.

Third, a novel requires interesting characters, someone readers can visualize. Invest a lot of time developing characters and their backstory before you begin to write.

Things that make a character interesting are life experiences, unusual habits, the way they dress, the way they react to unusual situations.

Character growth is another way to make a character interesting. In *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray's character starts as a total jerk and in the end, he learns what really matters in life.

002 Research

It is often said, "Write what you know." But just writing what you know is rarely enough to sustain a novel.

I have not written any romance novels, but I have had my share of heartbreak. Who hasn't? So, while heartbreak is not the McGuffin of my novels, characters within the novel suffer the romantic ups and downs we all suffer.

Having said that, nothing is more distracting than reading something that you know was written by someone who did not understand the subject. So, whatever you write take the time to research, research, research.

I like to set scenes in real places, Philadelphia, Atlantic City and so forth. And within those places, I write about specific streets and buildings. I use Google Maps to cruise around the area where action is set. If there is an Art Deco building in the area, I want the reader to visualize what I am seeing.

In science, technology, history, take time to make sure you understand the relevant facts and principles. Fact checking is an important anchor for any story. When writing *Dogs of War* which is about mutiny on a World War II submarine, I learned more about the South China Sea and the Mark 42 torpedo than I ever expected. These details add color and depth to the picture you paint for the reader.

003 Organize Writing

For several years, I practiced law in Atlantic City. It was like going to the circus every day. One of the things I learned is that no matter the case or the facts, the most organized lawyer wins. The same is true in novel writing.

Having written 21 novels, I found a few organizational tools have served me well. First, every novel gets its own computer folder. And within that computer folder, there should be at least two subfolders, one for drafts and one for research.

Writing an 80,000-to-100,000-word novel is not a one and done operation. It is a long process with many drafts and revisions. Drafts should be numbered. For most novels I have eight to ten drafts with numerous smaller revisions within each draft.

I discussed research in a prior missive. If you discuss dates, places, science, technology or history do enough research so you can speak with authority. The amount of research can grow rapidly. I used 95 medical articles as the basis of my novel *The Immortality Gene*. You do not want research files scrambled up with novel drafts or floating around your computer with no specific home.

Finally, one of the most important organizational tools is a file I call “Continuity.” In this file, I store character names, their back stories, their relationship to others, how they dress and any quirky habits they have. Continuity is also where I document a novel’s timeline. If A must proceed B to make sense, I document it so that events unfold smoothly for the reader.

004 Satisfy the Reader

When writing your novel, keep clearly focused on what the reader wants to get out of your book.

A writer friend, Cindy Villanueva, author of *Bread Pudding in Barcelona*, outlined what romance novel readers want. They want a Happily Ever After ending. Favorite plots involve, enemies as lovers, found family, love triangles and so forth. Part of research, research, research is knowing what readers want.

In Sci-Fi, readers want world building, creating new and different places and societies. They want a world created in bold, vibrant and unexpected colors. My

novel ***Maker of Men*** gave me room to write about life on a heavy gravity planet with a hostile indigenous population.

Most Sci-Fi readers also want things and events that are tethered to real science, no matter how loosely. In Sci-Fi, pigs don't fly, but they can in fantasy.

I also try to share with my readers something they might not already know. For example, ***Worthless Paper***, explores a dark corner of finance called distressed debt financing. Caution is advised when trying to educate the reader. You cannot get so detailed that you lose them. Education should come in small, bite sized doses. One of my characters is a lawyer. Judges will tell you lawyers do not know anything. My lawyer character asks a lot of questions and that gives other characters a chance to explain things like distressed debt.

I go for what I call a satisfying read. The good guys and gals always win in the end, even though they usually get roughed up pretty good along the way. The boy gets the girl, or the girl gets the guy. Bad guys or simply rude and clueless men and women get what they deserve. Give readers what they want.

005 Rewrites

Everyone writes differently. Once I have my McGuffin, the thing the story is about, and the characters, I think in scenes.

When I get an idea for a scene, I type it into my computer as fast as I can, just to get it on "paper."

What comes out is not necessarily the best. Sentence structure often needs to be simplified; better words substituted; and the rhythm changed.

Pay attention to technical details, like making sure the reader knows who is speaking. Letting the reader know who is speaking does not have to be as boring as: Bob said... Alice said... Bob said... Alice said...

Try, Bob looked off into space before turning toward Alice and saying, "You don't have a leg to stand on." Alice wore a man's suit and a yellow bow tie. She tugged the bow tie before asking, "What do you mean, I don't have a leg to stand on?"

Life is messy and so is writing. Scenes come to me in no particular order. I often must reorder scenes, so they make sense.

Rewrite is also used to fill in gaps for the reader. How did Bob know where to meet Alice? How did Alice get the treasure map? How could Bob and Alice have gotten from Philadelphia to Paris and back again in one day?

I usually do eight to ten drafts of a novel before I send it for proofreading.

006 Proof Reading

All us writers may be creative geniuses coming up with unique plots and fascinating characters. But few of us, I would put the percentage close to zero, are good proofreaders.

The importance of delivering a professional novel cannot be overstated. When a reader hits a misspelled word, “to” when it should have been “two,” an incomplete sentence, or a sentence that does not make sense, it is like hitting a speed bump at 60 miles an hour.

It only takes two or three speed bumps for someone to put down your novel, and worse, give it a negative review.

Spell check helps a lot, but it does not catch everything. At least one of my drafts focus on spelling, grammatical errors, and making sure the reader knows who is speaking and where they are.

Then, I spell check a manuscript again before sending it out to a proofreader. I have been using a high school English teacher as my primary proofreader. She uses Word’s change tracking. Most of the time I accept her corrections. Sometimes, she misses the mark and I decline her suggested spelling or word choice.

After proofreading, I usually print a draft and send it to my “first reader.” He is an old friend and not reluctant to point out problems. For example, my novel *Target Error* discusses a particle beam weapon that accidentally shot down a commercial jet. My first reader told me my explanation of particle beam physics lost him, so I re-wrote and simplified it.

Recently, I have added a second proofreader, a gentleman who has an excellent eye for detail. He has made a dozen or so suggestions on every “proofread” book. Most of them minor. Nevertheless, they improved quality at the margin.

007 Drama

No one wants to read a recitation of facts. A novel must have pace and drama. The reader should want to get to the next page and the next page and on and on.

I try to end every chapter with a question, a character in peril, a dilemma, something about to go terribly wrong. Readers often think to themselves, I will finish this chapter and stop. Our job as writers is to get the reader to hold on for one more chapter, and one more and one more.

Obstacles and roadblocks create drama. Out of control characters and situations create drama. Conflict creates drama. Unforeseen circumstance creates drama. The unexpected discovery creates drama.

Drama may be built a layer at a time. Hint at a problem. Create the facts and circumstances that make the problem real. Often, the best way to build drama is to give the reader the facts that create the problem or circumstances but leave the characters with no realization as to what the facts are building to. The unknown, unseen monster lurking in the dark woods is scarier than the monster sitting on the front porch eating a banana.

Timing is all important to creating drama. Circumstances might build gradually, but they should come to a crescendo rapidly.

Once drama is built, there is no need to resolve the conflict right away. Savor it for a while, roll around in it. Give the reader a chance to stew about it.

I usually focus one of my later drafts on sharpening conflict and drama.

008 Importance of Description

The number one job of a writer is to create a scene in the reader's mind. Plot and characters are important, but they can be thin and one dimensional without descriptions.

Take the time to tell the reader where characters and action is taking place. Is it indoors or out? Is it cold or hot? Has plywood been nailed over the windows of the house next door. Is the mud underfoot crunchy and frozen. What sound do you hear when driving on gravel. Are seagulls circling overhead? And why are they there? Do you smell fresh cut grass? Can you smell the bay? Is the cement in the sidewalk cracked? Are weeds growing up through the cracks. What sound does a rusty spring on the old wooden screen-door make when the door is opened?

Did the man who just got out of the car have creases in his pants? If so, what does that tell you about him? Was he young or old? Was he wearing a brown cable knit sweater? Or was he wearing a worn, brown bomber jacket? And was there a bulge right where a shoulder holster would be? Details help the reader visualize the action in your novel.

Details often help in character development. She never wore a speck of makeup. She was all business all the time. His shoes were always shined; it was probably because of his time in the Navy. He wore red Keds. It was his trademark.

Imagine a scene in your novel and as an exercise, write 200 to 300 words describing the background and your characters.

009 Dialogue

Dialogue is hard. There is a tendency to write long, stilted sentences. That is not how people speak. People tend speak in short sentences and often cut each other

off. Sometimes there are awkward pauses in conversations, as for example when a man and woman are on a first date.

Good dialogue comes from putting yourself in the mind of the person speaking. What do they want? What motivates them? What preconceived ideas do they have? I am working on a novel wherein a New Jersey defense lawyer is helping a woman in North Carolina. Everyone in this North Carolina town assumes he is a mob lawyer because he is from New Jersey. That misunderstanding creates opportunities for dialogue.

To put yourself in the mind of the person speaking; understand their back story. In a previous article I wrote about character development. The more you develop your character before you write, the richer your character and their dialogue.

Good dialogue is clear. Beware of too many pronouns. Say what you mean. Do not assume the reader knows what you mean.

Make sure the reader knows who is speaking and why. “He said,” “she said,” “he asked,” “she asked,” gets boring. Identify the speaker through action. For example, Brophy sipped his coffee, then asked, “Do you have any proof?” Another example is, Becker smacked him with the side of her hand, “Move.”

In real life, people talk over each other and misunderstand each other. That is O.K. if the reader can follow the misunderstanding.

Circumstances should drive dialogue as well as character traits. In my novel *Abandoned*, the only human on a planet kept getting taken for a bad alien. Bad aliens had tails that could whip out and strangle someone. He had to keep dropping his drawers to prove he did not have a tail. Allegations of being a bad alien, and the human getting tired of having to drop his drawers, created opportunities for dialogue.

Agatha Christie kept a notebook with her and wrote down interesting dialogue she heard.

Keep dialogue crisp by reading it out loud. If it sounds funny when you hear it. It needs work. Be ruthless about paring down dialogue. The fewer the words needed to make your point, the more impact it will have. Sometimes good dialogue can be paired down to a couple of words: “No!” “Get lost!” “You wish.”

010 Amazon Publishing

The traditional way to get published is to find an agent who will sell your book to a publisher. Traditional publishers rarely, if ever, consider manuscripts submitted by authors themselves. A traditional publisher buys a book; edits it; does the cover art; prints it; distributes it to bookstores; and if the writer is lucky, advertises it. The writer will then get royalties, if it sells.

Finding an agent, is a whole other topic. There are between one and two million fiction writers in the U.S. Agents are overwhelmed.

Those who politely stand in line, waiting to be discovered by an agent have little chance of success. It is the pirates who make things happen.

Amazon publishing gives everyone a chance to bypass the traditional system and become a pirate. Go to Kdp.amazon.com. Amazon publishing is free. They just take a cut of every book sold, as would a traditional publisher.

Amazon lists your book on its website; prints copies, if you want; ships; collects money from buyers; and remits royalties. That leaves the writer with two duties. First, they must write something compelling and second, they must do their own marketing. Even with traditional publishers, most authors must do their own marketing so, little is lost using Amazon.

Once your manuscript has been proofread and you have a cover, you can upload both to the Amazon website and just follow the directions. It may seem overwhelming at first, but it is a very well-designed process. Amazon can also convert an eBook to an audio book using artificial intelligence.

There are other platforms that help authors be pirates. Barnes and Noble has one. But beware of non-traditional publishers. They often they do little more than you could do for yourself on Amazon or Barnes and Noble. If you are going to spend money on your book, spend it first on proofreading.

011 A Story Within a Story

Writing a story within a story is a good way to frame a conflict or crisis. It is a good way to bring a reader up to speed on the events that led to what you are writing about.

For example, in my novel ***Down at the Stern***, several guys find an abandoned freighter adrift at sea. They also find the captain's personal journal which explains why the freighter was abandoned. In ***Desert Song*** people argue whether flying saucers are real. People tell stories they have heard.

A story within a story need not be long. In ***Hacked to Death***, a county prosecutor says several computer hackers have been murdered and a sign left on their chests, "Hacking is Death." He then explains that law enforcement has been covering up the murders to avoid copycat murders.

In ***Witchy Woman***, a gypsy marries a billionaire a month before he dies. The story within a story is her life history and how and why the billionaire married her.

In ***Rivers of Money***, nobody wants to mess the main character. His back story is that he was a boxing champ in the army and when his best friend got killed by a

couple of mobsters, he dispatched them to the great beyond, though there was no proof he did it.

Balance and pace are everything in writing. Do not get bogged down in a story within a story unless it advances the main plot. Sometimes the back story must leak out a little at a time throughout the novel. This helps build drama as the pieces of the puzzle slowly come together.

012 Give Something Extra

I like to give my readers a little something extra. This is usually a new idea or an explanation of something they might not have thought about.

In *Witchy Woman*, I discuss the idea of a tontine, an arrangement wherein the survivor in a group gets a large sum of money; talk about a motive for murder. In *Hacked to Death*, I explain acrostics, a code based on the first letter of each line.

In *Target Error*, I tip toe into the physics of how a particle beam weapon might work. In *Worthless Paper*, I explain that dark corner of finance called distressed debt and how it was used to fleece a pension fund of millions. In my Sci-Fi novel *Maker of Men*, I dip my toe into how quantum mechanics could be used for warp drive and faster than light communication.

In *The Immortality Gene*, I poke into research on aging and explore theories about how aging can be reversed. And in the real, non-fiction world, many scientists are working on reversing several aspects of aging even as I write this. One approach is to edit epigenetic tags. Epigenetic tags turn genes on and off.

But caution is advised. If you get too technical, you will lose the reader. That means concepts must be simplified and stated in plain English, free of jargon. Remember, people are not reading a textbook. They want to see what real people would do in difficult circumstances. These extra bits of information, are just a bonus.

013 Character Consistency

In a perfect world, characters are fully developed before you begin writing your novel. Your characters are in a sense, the guide stars of how events unfold. Once you have your McGuffin and characters, you should be able to give them a push; and they should bounce off each other and interact with one another throughout your novel.

Characters should have consistent personalities, motivations and habits. A person cannot be tall in one chapter and short in another. Yes, people can grow, but

if character traits slip and slide all over the place, your reader will be confused and will probably not enjoy the story.

In a perfect murder mystery, the reader should have all the clues to solve the crime before the detective does in the last chapter. For character behavior to be a clue, it must be consistent.

In my novels the boy gets the girl, or the girl gets the boy, bad people are punished, and people who are rude, thoughtless jerks get their comeuppance. This only works if the reader knows who the good guys and girls are and who are the bad ones. You may share insights with the reader that the characters in a story might not have. Characters behave based on what they know, and the characters only know what you, the writer have allowed them to see, hear, or feel. As a result, characters may be surprised by an outcome. Misunderstandings and miscommunications are often used to build conflict and drama.

To advance a plot point, a character might need to do something which, to this point, would have been out of character. Or they may need a skill or point of view that has not been revealed before. To keep faith with the reader, you must go back through your story, look at prior mentions of this character and give him or her the skills or point of view needed so that their actions are credible. Character consistency will help your story flow.

014 Conflict and Drama

As a writer, your job is to engage the reader. A well written novel will grab a reader emotionally. To build drama, there must be conflict.

A novel's McGuffin, the thing it is about, must include a problem to solve, a hurdle to overcome, or crisis to survive. The more dramatic the McGuffin, the more likely you are to tap into a reader's emotions.

No one is going to read a description of events: They did A, then they did B, then they did C. Boring.

Once a heroine or hero has a problem to solve or crisis to overcome, you cannot just let them solve it. There must be roadblocks and setbacks. Preferably, these roadblocks and setbacks put the heroine or hero in jeopardy. Pull on the reader's emotions. Don't forget, characters have emotions too and telling the reader how characters feel as the story unfolds is another way to tap into reader's emotions.

Conflicts may involve money, power, sex, love, revenge, or covering up a guilty act. One element of noir novels is a perfectly ordinary person who makes a seemingly small decision or makes a small mistake, that spirals out of control.

Conflict can be sharpened with well defined, fully fleshed out villains. A good villain cannot just have a black hat. The best villains are often charming, well

dressed, and might even have a sense of humor. In painting you cannot express light without dark as a contrast. In novel writing, a colorful villain helps paint a contrast with your heroine or hero.

015 Start with a Bang

My wife read two novels a month. When I would ask what one was about, she would often say, “I don’t know. I am only a couple of chapters in.”

Big name authors like James Patterson can get away with a couple dozen pages of backstory before a book’s McGuffin becomes apparent. But the rest of us writers cannot. If someone takes our book off a bookshelf, we have a page, page and a half to grab them and draw them in. If readers are not hooked after thirty or forty seconds of reading, they are likely to stop.

Make every effort to start your story with a bang. By that I mean a crisis; a heroine in peril; a disaster on the edge of happening; a character holding a gun thinking about ending it all; a baby in a basket crying as its mother launches it into a river.

In my novel *Hacked to Death*, the protagonist finds three executed men in a room full of computers. A sign on one of their chests says, “Hacking is Death.” In *Rivers of Money*, the governor’s helicopter crashes right after he rejects a bribe. In *Maker of Men*, bombs bursting across the city bathe the ceiling of the protagonist’s office in a red glow. In *Target Error* a commercial jetliner crashes after a mysterious flash.

The opening bang does not have to be the first chronological event in a novel and usually is not. It’s one and only job is to hook the reader. A back story to explain how the heroine or hero got to that dramatic moment can come later.

To get the biggest bang, be ruthless about editing out every unnecessary word or phrase. Short, information packed sentences are essential. But do not skimp on description. Set the time and place, the characters, and action so you create a picture for the reader. Revisit your opening pages at least a dozen times while writing to make sure you have presented the circumstance or event that is likely to give you the biggest bang.

016 The Suspects

One of Agatha Christie’s strengths was creating multiple characters with a motive for murder. So, to write a compelling murder mystery, craft a cast of characters, no one of whom is the obvious murderer. Why? To keep the reader engaged.

In a perfect world, you, as the writer, should provide the reader with all the clues necessary to solve the crime. Craft several characters each of whom seem to have motive, means and opportunity. Then at the end of the novel, remind readers of facts that provide an alibi for Jane, or John, or Jake. Often a key clue is mentioned as a throw away comment early in the book. Just, please give readers all the clues they need to solve the mystery before the concluding chapter.

You might create a character who seems to have an airtight alibi. At the end of the novel, you may remind the reader of some fact that undermines that alibi. A key element of magic shows is misdirection. A compelling writer does something similar.

Introduce ambiguity to strengthen the drama. Was the shadow lurking in the window a man or a woman? Given two witnesses to a crime, did they give the police matching descriptions? Typically, 12 to 20 points must match for conclusive fingerprint identification. What happens if you have a partial print with an 11-point match? Or, you might have a DNA match that is subsequently challenged because of lab contamination.

The TV series Columbo devoted 10% of the time to setting up the crime; 80% to chasing the wrong suspect; and to 10% solving the crime and getting the right suspect. Use dead ends to build tension and drama.

In Agatha Christie novels, the least likely person always committed the murder. Her formula was so well known that avid readers could predict the murderer by reading half her book. Do not be predictable. Suspects should be a mix of solid citizens and flamboyant... individuals. Keep your readers guessing.

017 Sex Sells

Do I have to tell you that sex sells? No. The issue is how to write about sex.

Selling sex, like selling love, is about anticipation. The provocative dress, the raised eyebrow, the look back when walking away. Of course, you can be more provocative if that is what your reader wants.

In my novel *Hacked to Death*, the protagonist is awakened in the middle of the night when a masked woman straddles him in bed. Moonlight glints off the dagger she is holding above his chest.

In *Shady Lady*, a high-end escort is on the run with a woman doctor. The doctor asks the escort whether she uses acupuncture to enhance her client's sexual pleasure.

In *Witchy Woman*, a woman who looks like she just stepped out of a vampire movie seems to have a strange power over men. Is it her figure, is it pheromones, or is it something else?

Anticipation can be built when two people, about to consummate their relationship, are interrupted by the nosey neighbor, the boss, an old boyfriend or girlfriend.

Sexual tension can occur because two people are thrown together under unusual circumstances. The kidnappers crammed them into a crate so small; she had to lay on top of him. The cruise ship left them behind on a deserted island.

The unavailable love interest is also a way to build anticipation. “If you weren’t such a louse...” Or “If you didn’t work for...”

Find or describe something that make the men and women in your novel unique and interesting. Scars, kissy lips, use your imagination.

Touch and motion are important. His kiss was soft as a butterfly landing on a rose. She said, “Given me your hand. I want to look at your lifeline.” “Help me climb up through that hatch, but don’t look. I am not wearing any...” you know.

When you build sexual tension, you build drama and keep your reader engaged.

018 Short Story

Step away from novel writing for a moment and consider the short story as a writing exercise.

Short stories can be from a 1,000 to 15,000 words with publishers preferring stories in the 2,000-to-7,000-word range.

When writing a novel, there is plenty of time and space to create detailed worlds, rich deep characters and multiple intertwined plots. Short stories do not allow that luxury.

When starting a novel, even if I have defined my McGuffin and outlined my characters, I do not always know how the story will unfold until I write it.

With a short story, you should know how the story will end. The ending must be satisfying for the reader. What would a reader like to see or feel after reading this story.

Many of my short stories have a humorous overlay, for example “Math Hysteria” explores what a group of friends would do if they suddenly developed telekinetic power. “Moses and the Ten Thousand Commandments” is an argument between God and Moses. Moses wants God to give him 10,000 commandments because all the Israelites want to do is party. God says, “Love God and love your neighbor.” Moses says, “That will never work.”

A short story should surprise and delight the reader. On the last page of “My Love Has Wings,” everything is turned upside down. In “Ruby Tuesday,” based on one of my own heartbreaks, a woman shops for a richer man.

If a short story is good, you might consider expanding it to novel length. I am looking into whether I can expand “Ruby Tuesday.” A character in my novel *Drugged* was a lovable conman and swindler. I made a short story out of one of the novel chapters.

Writing a short story is a good way to exercise your writing muscles. Can you come up with a suitable McGuffin? Interesting characters? And can you keep the reader engaged? Go forth and practice writing.

019 Character Identification

Make it easy for your reader to follow your story by limiting the number of named characters.

Refer to minor characters by job description rather than giving the reader another name to remember. If a character has a memorable characteristic tag that character’s appearance with that characteristic. The Goth waitress lived in a fantasy world of white makeup, black lipstick and nose rings. Once you have established her identity, you may refer to her as the Goth waitress.

Most novel storylines are complex with many characters and several intertwined plotlines. If Philo Barnes is a key player, help the reader by giving them his first and last name at least once a chapter, rather than going chapter after chapter referring to him as Barnes. Or simply referring to him as Philo.

Novels are rarely read in one sitting. Remind the reader who characters are throughout the story; your goal is to give the reader a satisfying experience. Readers should not have to page back through your book to find out who is doing what.

As the storyteller, you can simply tell the reader that Barnes is a bachelor. But another way to remind the reader that Barnes is a bachelor is to have one character mention it to another one. “Why do you think Philo Barnes never got married?”

In my novel *Witchy Woman*, Sabina Pruitt, has a six-foot eight-inch three-hundred-pound man servant named Burns. So, when I refer to Burns, I typically refer to his position as Burns, Pruitt’s man servant or I say something about his size. That helps the reader place him.

In a previous missive, I wrote about the importance of having a “Continuity” file. Each of your characters, their back story, and anything that distinguishes them should be in that file. It is all right to describe a character when we first meet her or him, and then several chapters later reintroduce them using bits and pieces of the original description.

020 Witty Banter

Few readers want all explosions and gunfire. Readers care about relatable characters, their danger, dilemmas and desires.

Witty banter is a great way to give characters depth, if you can do it. Witty banter often involves one character exaggerating the claims of another or puncturing the ego of another.

Witty banter works best when you, as the writer, have set up circumstances that make it flow naturally.

In my novel *Archimedes' Principle*, a woman and man are trapped in a collapsed mine. She is a brilliant mathematician; he is an accountant. Up to this point she has been poking him for being a mere bean counter. He says, "What's the matter? Don't you have an equation to math us out of here?"

The 1934 movie *The Thin Man*, starring William Powell and Myrna Loy, is peppered with witty banter. In the final scene, the oddball suspects are invited to a dinner. Myrna Loy says, "Please pass the nuts." Then corrects herself, "Please pass our guests the nuts." The 1940 movie *His Girl Friday*, starring Cary Grant and Roseland Russell is full of witty banter.

Sometimes witty banter is based on something one character, and the reader knows, but another character doesn't know.

In *The Immortality Gene*, a scientist asks a lawyer what he is looking for in a document. The lawyer says, "The secret of life, the universe and everything." The scientist says, "42." A doctor sitting next to the lawyer looks at page 42 and says, "It's just a chemical equation. I don't get it." Readers of *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* get it.

Witty banter should be short and sharp.

In *Crime Watch*, an exotic and mysterious woman is threaded through the plot. She refuses to give her name because she says, "Men get possessive when they know your name." That refusal is an opportunity for banter.

One cannot write a whole novel of witty banter, but it would be great if it could be done.

021 Book Cover

It is great to write, but the real test is whether anyone buys your books. Book promotion takes almost as much time as writing and editing.

Whether in a bookstore, or on Amazon, books are often impulse buys, so make sure you have a good cover.

If an agent has sold your book to a publisher, the publisher will create a cover for you.

If you are a pirate, selling your book on Amazon or through some non-traditional means, it is up to you to create a cover.

Some authors pay artists to create book covers. I tried that for one book, and the result was cartoony.

No one knows more about your book than you. Pick something from your book, an action, a thought, a line of dialogue, a crisis and use that as inspiration for your cover. Pick something that will encourage a potential reader to look inside.

I design my own covers in a standard format. A black band at the top with the book title in red lettering; a black band at the bottom with my pen name, Jack English in red lettering; and an illustration in the middle that informs the buyer about the subject of the book.

I typically create a half dozen to a dozen book covers before I find one I like.

If you are publishing through Amazon, or Barnes and Noble you will need a squib, a short statement, for the back cover over your book. It should be something that hooks the reader. A prior missive discussed starting the novel with a bang. That bang should inspire the back cover squib.

022 Setting the Scene

Place the reader in time in space. What can they see, what can they hear, and feel. You might also write about what they can smell.

My novel *Hacked to Death* introduces my main character, sets a scene, tells the reader what the McGuffin is.

Jack English parked across the street from a mid-century ranch house. The front door was open a crack. Iron Butterfly's "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" was playing. The bass was cranked all the way up. He could feel it in his bones.

He pushed the door open with his elbow. He didn't want to leave fingerprints.

There were blood streaks where someone had dragged a body down the hall. The blood streaks ended in a room full of computers. There were three bodies. A sign on one of them said, "Hacking is Death."

Let me make a couple of points. I did not just describe a situation. I personalized it by asking the reader to view it through my main character's senses. Multiple senses were involved. The scene's dramatic impact was heightened by blood and dead bodies, and was further dramatized by the threat, "Hacking is Death."

In a scene in my novel *Shady Lady*, I try to take the reader out into the cold, in a car sliding out of control, and make them feel every bump and every impact.

Ice and snow made driving on the Atlantic City Expressway hazardous. A bus crash forced them off the road, down an embankment, and onto a frozen, grassy median. He couldn't get up the embankment back on to the road, and he was seconds from plowing into a stand of trees. He steered between the biggest ones, hoping the smaller trees would slow the car without killing them. The screams of his passengers rose to a crescendo as he hit the first small tree and knocked it flat. The screams stopped when the car slid into a large old oak and came to an abrupt halt.

After you write your scene edit out unneeded words. The fewer the words you use, the greater the emotional impact.

023 The McGuffin

The McGuffin is the thing the novel is about. It is the problem the characters must solve.

The stock motives for murder are lust and love, greed, revenge, power, jealousy and a cover up. A good McGuffin pushes motives sideways, in an unexpected direction. The spurned lover, a crime gone wrong or an accidental murder.

Cindy Villanueva, author of *Bread Pudding in Barcelona* said all romance novels must have a happily ever after ending. But the ending alone does not constitute the McGuffin. Common McGuffins are love triangles, enemies as lovers and found family.

The McGuffin in *Casa Blanca* is getting a letter of transit to leave Casa Blanca enroute to America.

In 1933 President Roosevelt ordered all Americans to turn in their gold to the government. The McGuffin in my novel *Crime Watch* is the search for gold hidden in 1933. In my novel *Down at the Stern*, friends find an abandoned freighter on the high seas chartered by Hussain to hide gold from the Americans. In my novel *Drugged*, the McGuffin is a whistleblower who accuses a pharmaceutical company of supplying drugs to the mob.

The McGuffin cannot just be murder. The McGuffin must be the circumstance that makes the murder and its solution intriguing. In Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, a man thinks his neighbor killed his wife but cannot prove it. Often a McGuffin sets up dominos that the reader watches fall. The McGuffin might be the circumstance that makes the outcome unlikely.

Someone might think they are doing something for a good and noble reason only to find out they were being exploited.

In my novel *The Immortality Gene*, a start-up pharmaceutical company gives 80-year-olds, the health and vigor of 50-year-olds. Of course that leads to all kinds of mayhem, greed, jealousy, and yes, murder.

In a perfect world, a writer should spend a lot of time nailing down and refining their McGuffin before they begin to write.

024 Noir Novel

Film noir is characterized by morally ambiguous characters, plots that go sideways, moody settings: night, rain, damp, cigarette smoke, and high contrast black and white photography. Deep shadows and light filtered through blinds or cigarette smoke are common. Common tropes are the loner, the private eye on the edge, and the fem fatal. Noir novels rarely have happy endings.

Noir novels feature narration by the protagonist. That gives the writer a chance to explore his or her loneliness and despair.

Noir novels are not about blood and guts, shootouts or explosions. They are about people and the bad circumstances they find themselves in.

Before starting a noir novel, think long and hard about the McGuffin, the event that triggers the character(s) downward spiral. Sometimes an average person makes a small mistake or bad decision that spirals out of control and the coverup leads to murder.

“Traffic was backed up, so I got off onto a desolate local road. It was dark and pouring rain. The headlights were useless. I could barely see. Then I felt a thud, like I hit a pothole. When I looked in the rearview mirror, I saw a body laying at the edge of the road.” What the character does next could be heroic or could send him or her into a downward spiral.

A noir character might exploit the errors of others, for example a bank teller who notices the deposit slip was for \$8,000 when \$9,000 in cash was handed in and deposits the extra \$1,000 to his or her account. Or a character might see someone drop dead on the sidewalk and steal his wallet. Noir drama is heightened when someone else stumbles upon the character’s deceit and wants to be cut in.

Noir novels are as much about creating a dark and moody atmosphere as they are about badly acting characters. Paint a picture of loneliness and despair in the rooms, diners, poolhalls, and cramped dingy offices people inhabit.

025 Plot Twists

Shakespeare said, “The course of true love never did run smooth.” The same is true of a plot in a well-crafted novel.

In a novel, a plot twist is often a paradigm shift. They can be big or small and there can be multiple twists in a single novel. They all change the trajectory of the action.

A murder defense might rest on the fact that the defendant never met the victim. Then at trial, the prosecution submits last minute evidence that they were lovers. In my novel *Sunken Island*, someone is trying to keep people off the island because they think there is treasure there. In reality, they want to keep them off the island to cover up murder.

In my short story, “My Love Has Wings” the plot twist comes at the very end when a diplomat is recalled and forced to leave his love behind. In my novel *Abandoned*, a man who has longed for one woman throughout the whole book ends up going with an alien female who has been a co-worker throughout the story.

To qualify as a plot twist, it must have a seismic impact on the plot line or the characters. A simple error or misunderstanding won’t do, and it will not provide the reader with the satisfaction they expect from a good read. On the other hand, a plot twist cannot be totally out of character. A pizza delivery boy cannot suddenly develop X-ray vision. That won’t satisfy the reader either.

I cannot emphasize enough that satisfying the reader is the goal of any well-crafted novel.

Be creative in your plot twists. Incorporate several plot twists if you can. But make sure they flow logically from the facts and circumstances you have presented.

026 Writing for Impact

A well written novel should have the impact of a fast-moving freight train. Pace is all important.

To keep a reader engaged, dramatic events, crises, and game changing questions should be sprinkled throughout a novel and not just appear in the first and last chapter.

Ideally, crises and dramatic events, and game changing questions should appear at the end of a chapter, so a reader says to themselves, I will read one more chapter before I stop.

Some have the discipline to sprinkle dramatic events through their novel as they are outlining it. Others, like me, insert dramatic events on the fly as the plot unfolds. That said, I often invent dramatic events during one of my rewrites to keep up the pace.

In many novels, the pace gets bogged down through unnecessary and over technical explanations of something. Condense! Condense! Condense! Even

procedural crime dramas are not technical manuals. Paint a picture for the reader with a few strokes of a brush. You do not have to paint every hair on a dog.

Avoid adjectives as much as possible. Not “It was big, really big, humongous.” But rather “It was big as a house.”

Everything in life is balance. Even though you should keep up the pace of a story, you may need to remind the reader of characters, facts and circumstances mentioned earlier in the novel. You cannot expect the reader to memorize your every word. Nothing is worse for pace than for the reader to have to stop and wonder who Carlton is. You can remind the reader with a few words that make it easy for them to keep up with you. “This is just like the gun Carlton made with his 3-D printer.”

027 Write What You Know

Write with authority. You cannot bring a reader into a moment, if you are not in the moment when you write something. You must visualize what you want your reader to visualize.

The best way to write with authority is to write what you know. I have a murder mystery series in which the main character, Jack English, is a lawyer. Yes, I know that is the same as my pen name. I can write with authority about my lawyer character because I was a trial lawyer in Atlantic City for several years.

I am currently chipping away at my first romance novel. The working title is ***Second Chance Romance***. It is based on a romance I had last year that involved candlelight dinners, dancing cheek to cheek, moonlight walks along the shores of Lake George and swimming in Bermuda. I have also interviewed 65 women on what romance means to them. I am writing what I know.

I have written one historical novel, ***Dogs of War***, which is about mutiny on a World War II submarine. I served a tour as a Naval Officer; and Officer Candidate School is basically ship-driving school, so I had some background. I supplemented my personal background with extensive research including reading letters that submariners wrote home during the war.

One of my Jack English mysteries delved into a dark corner of finance called distressed debt financing. As a former CPA and Chief Financial Officer, I ran across distressed debt.

Nearly everyone has enough life experience to sustain a novel. You need not have degrees or the experiences I had. Think about what you know well. It may be raising children under difficult circumstances; surviving a layoff; dealing with an out-of-control boss; helping a loved one with end-of-life issues; or your own romance. All can be grist for a compelling novel if you write from experience.

028 Be Your Characters

A prior article discussed the importance of creating characters before starting to write. Characters' descriptions, quirks, and motivations should be set down in a continuity file that can be consulted while writing.

If you want your characters to be fully fleshed out, three-dimensional characters, and not simply line drawings you must inhabit the characters. You must go into their mind and see the world through their eyes. Once you do that, your characters will make more realistic, and make more interesting choices.

Your characters should be living, breathing individuals the same as you. If you become that individual, good or bad, while writing their thoughts and actions, your writing will be genuine.

Given the McGuffin, the thing that the story is about, and genuine characters, your story will unfold.

Think carefully about character motives. In a well written novel, not all characters will have the same motive. Sure, maybe everyone wants to ingratiate themselves to the rich old uncle. But maybe characters are equally motivated by fear, anger, revenge... or even love.

Some characters might be restrained by insecurity, an insecurity that makes them make bad decisions or put off doing something they should do. Other characters might shrink from a chance to act... to save the day... by fear of failure. Others might be pulled between conflicting motives like fear and greed.

Be your character, at least while you are writing them. See the world through their eyes. Feel their emotions. Feel their anger. Feel their love. Feel their heartbreak. Be your character and your writing will ring true.

Novel Writing 029 Romance

Romance is the largest category of novel sales.

Last year I had a lovely romance. It involved candlelight dinners, dancing cheek to cheek, moonlight walks along the shores of Lake George and swimming in Bermuda. I was on the verge of offering her the moon and the stars. It wasn't enough.

I usually write murder mysteries and action-adventure stories. My next novel is going to be a romance, loosely based on the romance I had last year. I start the novel by asking, "What is romance?"

Men have little understanding of romance, so I have been asking women what they consider romantic. So far, I have spoken to at least 65 women.

There are the grand gestures: flowers, candlelight dinners, dancing cheek to cheek, moonlit walks, romantic getaways. The women I have spoken to say that romance also involves a hundred little things.

Before my wife died, I thanked her for cooking at every meal. Then I cleared the table after dinner, did the dishes, and kept the kitchen clean. I held her hand wherever we went. Our marriage was good.

Now that I am on my own again, I must relearn what it means to be romantic. I cannot write about romance if I do not understand it and practice it... every day.

No novel about romance would be complete without heartbreak; like the heartbreak I experienced last year when that romance ended.

So, if I had to summarize romance, it would be making a woman feel like she was the center of the universe, not just on her birthday, but every hour of every day. When you write about romance, include gestures large and small, sometimes the smallest gestures are the most endearing. And sprinkle in some heartbreak and disappointment. As our friend Billy Shakespeare said, "The path of true love never did run smooth."

I will write about the sex in romance novels in a later post.

Novel Writing 030 Voice

Every writer will have his or own voice, meaning their own style and point of view. A writer's voice also comes from the pace, rhythm and flow of their writing. That said, there are a few things all writers should strive for.

A general rule of good writing is to use the simplest word possible, victim rather than decedent, main character rather than protagonist, and so forth.

Use slang sparingly. It should be salt and pepper, not a twenty-pound block of salt.

Avoid acronyms as much as possible and where you use acronyms explain them to the reader several times throughout the novel. Readers read for pleasure. This is not a memory test.

Characters should have their own voice. Part of voice is dictated by grammar and word choice. Do they speak in long meandering musings or short abrupt statements. Other parts of voice come from how they dress and act and from their motives.

Attitude is part of a character's voice. Is he or she aggressive? Rude? Impatient? Fearful? Timid? Or just plain stupid? Does he or she cut people off in mid-sentence?

A character's voice can be further defined by who they associate with; how they eat and drink; whether they smoke; and whether they take drugs. Voice is more than words; it is about how a character thinks and acts.

Curse words, especially the F word, are rarely useful in crafting a character's voice and are often a sign of bad writing. Avoid them as much as possible. If you are trying to craft a mean, rotten character, paint a picture for the reader by describing what makes the character mean and rotten rather than filling their mouths with curse words.

Novel Writing 031 Getting Started

Many people want to write a novel, but they do not know how to get started.

A novel does not have to come to you as a fully formed idea. Set up an idea file on your computer. Entries might be a couple of sentences or a couple of pages. The important thing is to write. Reduce your thinking to tangible form. If you develop the habit to putting things in your idea file, in a short while you will amaze yourself at how much writing you have done. And do I need to tell you to write every day?

My novels rarely come to me as a fully formed vision. At best they come to me in scenes. If a scene comes to you, write it down.

Define the McGuffin, a thing the novel is about, usually a problem or issue.

What is going to grab the reader's attention? Write that scene.

How will the novel end. Will it satisfy the reader? Romances must have happy endings. Most of my action, adventure, mystery and Sci-Fi novels have happy endings. Noir novels generally do not.

Think about the pivotal point in your novel, the point at which the boy realizes he cannot live without the girl, or vice versa. Or the point at which the character realizes the noble cause they have been working for is a scam. Write that scene.

With a good, gripping beginning, a pivotal point and an ending scene, you can fill in the pieces.

The opening scene must be dramatic. Then write the backstory, everything that led up to your opening scene.

How did the events in your novel resolve themselves in the final scene? There must have been facts, actions, scenes that led up to that final dramatic climax. Write everything that led up to that ending.

So go forth and write every day.

Novel Writing 032 About Sex

Many men think of sex in terms of two sweaty bodies banging together. That is why a lot of women lose their enthusiasm for sex.

Good sex is about making a woman feel like she is the center of the universe for an hour or two. Yes, I said an hour or two.

It starts before the bedroom. Good sex begins with hugging and cuddling and sweet words.

The most seductive words in English are, "Tell me about yourself." Or "Tell me something I don't know about you." Or, "Tell me about your day." Or even, "Talk about your hopes and dreams and what I can do."

Women want to feel seen. They want to be heard. We men wrongly assume we should control the conversation. We need to shut up and listen.

After a woman has had her say and realizes she is with someone who sees her and hears her, physical touch comes next. Touch should be sweet and gentle.

Every woman responds differently to touch. A man who has a partner who is honest about what works for her and what does not, is lucky. There are many forms of touch, some of which I will discuss later.

The whole-body hug is almost universally appreciated. This works best when standing. In most hugs people are barely in physical contact. Hugs lasting more than three seconds are rare.

I write about, and practice, long hugs; hugs that last five minutes. And yes, I time them to make sure they last five minutes.

Do not speak during a long hug; just hold each other. Feel each other's breathing. Feel each other's body heat. It is alright to sway a little during a long hug.

Physiologically, a long hug generates oxytocin, the bonding and feel-good hormone.

When men and women get together, there is often a lot of anxiety over body image, what the other partner thinks, and whether this is the right thing to do. The long hug helps them to relax. In a perfect world, having sex should be as comfortable and easy as slipping into a warm bath.

If you want to write about sex, you must do it with sensitivity to the characters' feelings. Otherwise, sex becomes as mechanical and boring as winding a clock.

More to come. Stand by and keep checking social media.

Social Media Handles

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