

Risking at Writing

Watching Olympic skaters glide across the ice with effortless grace, we often forget the countless hours of practice, spills, qualifying competitions, and heartaches culminating in the five-minute performance before the judges. Similarly, when reading a piece of fiction, we are not aware of the pages of first drafts, rewrites, discarded scenes, etc., leading to the published work. Both make it seem so easy, anybody could do it. Having attended ice skating lessons with honest-to-goodness Russian Olympic trainers (done for a group of Americans interested in learning ice skating) as well as writing for more than twenty years, I know what lies behind both.

I never learned to do any jumps or spins on ice because of what I considered to be a healthy respect of the consequences of forty-something-year-old bones connecting with something solid (like ice). Fear kept me from taking a chance on ice, but not from pursuing my dreams of writing. In the end, I decided a bruised ego could be painful, but didn't require surgery.

Just like ice skating, writing comes more easily to some, but one can *learn* the skill if willing to take the risk. Beyond any innate talent, authors need practice, an ability to accept criticism, and perseverance. I didn't read my first book on writing until after I completed my first manuscript and received a few rejections. *Stein on Writing* provided me with basics such as point of view and dialogue. I followed my self-study with classes through a local junior college, and finally pushed myself to join a writer's group.

For those interested in pursuing a dream of writing: 1) Read--both about writing as well as those by others, 2) Write—practice makes perfect, 3) Accept constructive criticism—recognize it is about the piece and not you, and 4) Risk it—and like the skater, go for the gold!

Coming up with Stories

In his memoir *On Writing*, Steven King describes the inspiration for his 2002 novel *From a Buick 8*. A fall behind a Mobile station on the Pennsylvania Turnpike sets him wondering about how long his car would sit at the pump before someone would investigate his disappearance if he hadn't saved himself.

While I haven't had such a dramatic epiphany, I can relate to King's description of playing "what if?" While working in Russia, I read an article by Richard Preston in the March 9, 1998 *New Yorker*--"Annals of Warfare: The Bioweaponers." In it, he describes Iran's recruitment of unemployed scientists from the former Soviet Union's weapons laboratories—both biological and nuclear. My first thought was "why would someone accept such a job offer?" I gave my main character no job, a sick child, and friends with underworld connections—and *Saving Hope* was born.

Beyond putting my character in a situation with no job, I have to provide the motivation--the problem s/he wishes to resolve. Then make it difficult for them to get there and force them to change in the process. These elements--character, conflict and change—provide the backbone for any story. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has a beautiful quote I try to take to heart as I write. "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

Thus, the more difficult the problems and choices confronted, the better. In *Saving Hope*, the main character must choose between taking a job offering hope for her daughter and helping the FSB (formerly the KBG) save the world from a deadly virus.

From a one-word question—why?—a whole novel is born.

The Role Contests Played in my Writer's Journey

I entered my first contest while I still lived abroad back in the dark ages when you still submitted paper entries. I'd finished a novel, but had no idea how if it was as brilliant as I thought it was. Trolling the Internet, I found a contest that offered not only cash prizes, but also a critique for an extra fee. I entered and paid for the critique, certain I would win and get heaps of praise for my work. When the day passed for finalists to be contacted and I had not received an email, I was crushed. Once the score sheets arrived, the judges' reviews and comments deflated me even more. Had they not realized they were holding the next Pulitzer Prize winner in their hands?

After scraping my ego off the floor and reminding myself I'd entered because I needed the feedback, I re-read the comments accepting the possibility the judges might just know something. If nothing else, their comments reflected those of my future readership. Taking this perspective allowed me to see my writing through their eyes. If the judge didn't understand a passage, or found a description boring, or some wording drew them from a story, a reader would as well.

With that attitude in mind, I found their remarks helpful in understanding what appeals to readers and what distracts them from the story, and used those lessons to strengthen my work. Even as my writing improved, I found there was always more to learn.

My first big break was a short story entered into the Southwest Writers' annual contest. I snagged second place and the judge, an editor of a small literary magazine, published it. Even that entry returned with enough red marks on it to make a vampire drool.

Since then, I've entered so many contests, I've lost track. I've done well in some (finaling in the 2008 RWA Golden Heart) and not so well, but I consider there's no better way to get a different perspective on your writing than a cold read from a stranger.

I have also judged a number and always try to provide the same kind of comments I found helpful. In general, here are things I've come across (and also learned myself) that make a stronger entry:

- 1) Proofread your entry—more than once. Nothing can pull a reader out of your story faster than poor grammar, punctuation, or spelling. My best suggestion here is to let the story “sit” for a few days and then read it out loud.
- 2) Start with action to immediately pull the reader into the story.
- 3) Avoid backstory in the first chapter. A lot of novice writers will provide their main character's whole history. While the writer needs to know this, the reader only needs certain important bits of information and should be fed this in small bites, as required.
- 4) Make the main character's goal (what they want to achieve by the end of the book) apparent in the first chapter.
- 5) Watch the use of exclamation points. More than one or two in a novel is enough. Overuse diminishes their effectiveness.
- 6) Focus on active, descriptive verbs. Instead of walking, have the character skip, slog, march, mince, etc. across the room.
- 7) Check for the use of “it.” “It took him two hours to finish the repairs,” is less active than “He finished the repairs in two hours.”
- 8) Watch for dialogue tags that are inappropriate. Try to “pout” a sentence. (e.g. “I'm not happy,” she pouted.) A writer can't go wrong with “said,” “asked,” and “whispered.”

As I move to the next stage in my journey, with the debut of my novel *Saving Hope*, I know my experiences with contests will help me understand reviewers' reactions to that story. You can't please every judge or every reviewer, but a nugget of wisdom can usually be found in what they have to share.

Enhancing the Story

In his book *Stein on Writing*, Sol Stein describes the editing process as “liposuction,” removing the flab from a story. But what to do when a story needs silicon instead of liposuction?

As a writer of flash fiction, I have disciplined myself to make every word count, so when I decided to take an 800-word piece and turn it into a novella, I knew major enhancement would be required. I recalled an interview I’d heard with Orson Scott Card about his novel *Ender’s Game*. His had also been a short story, and when he decided to expand it, he realized the story needed to start earlier, providing more motivation and history to the main characters.

To apply this to my own story, I started by considering the original piece and identified the various elements of the story using Anne Lamott’s ABCDE formula (Action, Background, Conflict, Development, and Ending):

- Action—Start with something happening to draw the reader into the story.
- Background—Provide context for readers to understand how the characters came to the current situation
- Conflict—The characters must want something they don’t have and work to achieve it (sometimes against each other)
- Development—The 70-80% of the story describing the characters’ struggle to get what they want. Each time it appears they have the goal within reach, give them something more difficult to overcome until they reach the climax
- Ending—What happens after they reach their goal. In a romance, the hero and heroine realize their “happily-ever-after;” in a mystery or thriller, all the loose ends are tied up; in a literary story, the ending may be rather ambiguous

With the original story now dissected, I then followed these steps:

1) Determined where the current story fit into the enhanced one

Because I wanted to keep the original story as the climax (the piece just before the “Ending”), I needed to work on expanding and adding scenes for the first four plot elements-- A through D.

2) Built the new story around the original scene.

Taking my cue from Orson Scott Card, I first pondered the background of these two characters—the motivations and goals that had brought them to that point in the story. By more fully developing this information, I actually envisioned ways to increase the conflict between them and make the climax more dramatic.

As I wrote these new scenes, I realized I was creating pages of back story instead of “in-the-moment” action scenes. To solve this problem, I wrote a new inciting incident (Lamott’s “Action”) and advanced the story from that point to the climax.

3) Added dialogue and description to create richer scenes and move the story forward

Once I had the basic skeleton of my enhanced story in place, I included more dialogue and description. In flash fiction, description might be limited to only one short sentence to set a scene or describe a character. Including additional details created much richer scenes, and before I knew it, my over-10,000-word story was done.

4) Made every word count.

Just as with any story, however, the draft must be edited and the writing tightened to create a polished piece worthy of submission. Whether 800, 8000, or 80,000 words, tight writing increases interest and maintains the pace.

Applying these techniques ensured a well-crafted story that would keep the reader involved and reading and avoided a bloated “plastic-surgery-gone-bad” outcome.

Fools Rush In: Characters and Motivation

A common plot element in many horror movies is to put a group of people in an isolated environment and slowly (and often horrifically) kill them off one-by-one as they go off to explore a strange noise or in search of another who has already met their Maker. This has been referred to as being “too stupid to live.” Anyone who knows a killer is stalking the group and still goes off on her own because she’s “heard something” probably assists the gene pool by eliminating herself.

In story analysis, this is the character’s motivation—why she does what she does—and it plays a central role in creating a believable story. Having judged a number of manuscript contest entries, one problem I encounter over and over involves the main character being in an uncomfortable situation but remaining--even as more and more problems rain down upon her. Like the horror movie’s next victim, without proper motivation, she deserves her fate. If a woman is not happy living on the ranch, why doesn’t she just get on a bus and move to the big city? Without clear motivation keeping her where she is, her reactions make her appear whiney, self-centered, and possibly masochistic.

The character must be *compelled* to do what she does because she has no other choice—she has no power in the situation. The bank is threatening to foreclose on the ranch and her father is sick and will be out in the cold without her help to keep the ranch running. Staying on the ranch now makes her appear noble and self-sacrificing. Make the horror movie character leave the group to chase after the dog holding the key to the get-away car, and she becomes brave. Giving your characters clear and convincing incentives creates a believable situation and story.

Motivation was actually the seed for my novel *Saving Hope*. While working in Russia, I came across an article in the March 9, 1998 *New Yorker*. “Annals of Warfare: The

Bioweaponeers” by Richard Preston described Iran’s recruitment of Russian scientists for their own development of bioweapons. I considered what would compel a scientist to accept such an offer and spun a tale of an unemployed Russian microbiologist with a sick child who stumbles into this world and becomes aware of a sinister plan to export a deadly virus out of the country. Her motivation changes from saving her child to saving the world.

As you develop your story, analyze your characters’ actions with an eye to *why* they do what they do. Making motivation clear to readers creates a sympathetic character they will root for throughout the book.

Six Steps to a Polished Story

I recently appeared on a panel at Thriller Fest (the International Thriller Writers' conference in New York) to discuss self-editing. Given the size of the crowd in the room at 9:30 in the morning, the topic obviously interests many writers. At the outset, all the panelists agreed on the importance of self-editing regardless of whether you plan to independently publish or seek a commercial publisher.

A document full of typos, incorrect grammar or spelling, or a convoluted structure pulls the reader from the story and will more likely result in a rejection. An agent or editor may choose to pass on such a manuscript simply because the investment needed to bring the piece up to an acceptable standard may be too great. For those planning to independently publish, a well-polished manuscript will reduce per-hour editorial fees.

In addition, the panelists also agreed on the components of a comprehensive manuscript revision and provided advice based on personal experiences. The discussion was lively and followed by a lot of questions, but as a group, we identified a number steps to a draft worthy of a commercial publisher's consideration or final touch-ups before formatting and uploading as an independently produced work.

- 1) **First and foremost, finish the manuscript.** No one can edit what is not written. Rather than having umpteen versions of chapter one, get the whole story out before proceeding to step 2. The piece doesn't have to be perfect, just written.
- 2) **Establish some objectivity.** Believe it or not, writers should not try to edit the work until they have put the piece away for a few weeks. During this time, the author can start a new project, read a book, or even take a few days off, but must avoid returning to the piece too

soon. Without objectivity, the author will likely view the work as the most brilliant—or most terrible—ever written.

3) **Begin developmental editing.** The focus during this period involves honing the manuscript's organization and basic story-telling techniques. Some of the major elements at this time include:

- a) Determining if the plot hits recognized turning points at the appropriate page numbers. A number of different writing guides provide these marks. Comparing the story's scenes to these points may indicate certain ones need to be shifted to later or earlier in the story, combined to keep the pace moving, or even eliminated if they don't move the story forward.
- b) Checking for long expository passages providing information that doesn't move the story forward, including all those little nuggets uncovered during research for the book.
- c) Other more concrete issues at this stage are:
 - Is the point of view consistent? Is the reader seeing the story from only one character's point of view at a time? Or is "head-hopping" occurring where the story shifts from one character to another and back? One subtle form of head-hopping occurs when motivation is attached to a dialogue tag. For example, "'I don't want to go,' she said, hiding her true feelings." is fine when the story is in this character's point of view. If it isn't, the phrase "hiding her true feelings" suddenly shifts into the mind of this character.
 - Does the dialogue sound genuine, or does the college professor sound more like a high-school drop-out or visa-versa? Use appropriate vocabulary, sentence structure

and complete/incomplete thoughts to better mimic actual speech as well as the character's personality.

- Is the tension and conflict between the characters high enough to keep the reader's attention? This should occur in every scene.
- d) Sharing with beta readers. Allowing some knowledgeable friends or fellow writers to give the story a read-through at this point provides additional objectivity. They must be willing to provide the honest truth about points in the manuscript where they became confused or found a character's actions inconsistent with their image. Sharing the manuscript with someone who always says whatever they read is the best thing ever written will boost an ego, but won't provide the feedback needed to make it a stronger story. Recognize a frank assessment represents how an editor, agent, or reader would respond and accept it as constructive criticism.
- 4) Once the story had been strengthened and tightened by the developmental editing, **move on to the copy-editing stage**. This review focuses on such essentials as:
- a) Consistent and correct use of commas, quotations, and dashes.
 - b) Consistent formatting. Did the font, spacing, or paragraphing remain constant throughout the manuscript?
 - c) Actions occurring in the appropriate sequence. For example, the two actions in this sentence, "Rummaging through the drawer, he pulled out a gun," cannot occur simultaneously. The sentence should be corrected by placing the activities in the appropriate order, such as "He rummaged through the drawer and pulled out a gun."
 - d) Using the strongest word possible. Why have a character "walk" when he can "prance," or "skip," or "march?"

e) Eliminating unnecessary words. In my own writing, I have learned to search for the word “that” and delete it or restructure the sentence to remove as many instances as possible.

As a corollary: when describing a person, use “who,” not “that.” “He was the kind that...” should be corrected to “He was the kind who...” Better yet, rewrite the sentence and delete “who” altogether.

f) Ensuring active vs. passive voice. “His head was hit by a snowball” (passive voice) lacks the immediacy of “A snowball hit him in the head” (active voice). Searching for the verb “to be” (“is,” “am,” “was,” and “were”) will help seek out such sentences.

5) **Read the manuscript aloud.** This exercise helps identify missing words, awkward sentence structures, and unrealistic dialogue somehow missed in the earlier passes.

6) **Consider a final beta read.** The second review by someone not familiar with the work will catch additional errors.

Following this process will result in a strong story where both the manuscript and writer shine and will attract the attention of both editors and readers.