

Valuable tips, tools, examples, and quotes for The Serious Writer

The Serious Writer

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Volume I

The Serious Writer

By R.T. Byrum

Illustrated by Earl Hardy



Who best attracts the imagination, catches the heart

Every writer, regardless of his or her progress into the world of imagination needs help through hints, tips, direction, inspiration or even a friendly kick in the pants. That's the purpose for [The Serious Writer](#). Read and use it only if you are interested in earning good money as a freelancer, or making your word processing software and your computer work harder for you, or ending procrastination in finally writing your novel, or recording your history for your posterity. Otherwise this "get busy" book may only frustrate you. [RTB](#)

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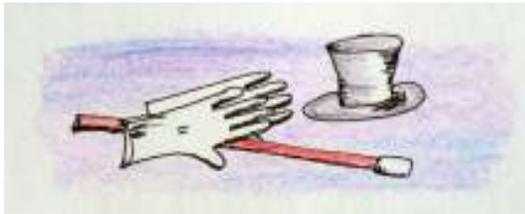
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- Flashbacks
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CHAPTER ONE

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU ARE A SERIOUS WRITER?

Writing-The Magical Art

Something magical happens when you pick up a pencil or a pen, or place your fingers on the keyboard of a computer or that old Remington typewriter. Gradually, the place where you are sitting begins to fade, and you find yourself sitting before the mirror of Alice in Wonderland.



Whether fiction or non-fiction, your fingers and hands begin to move on their own, and you become the reader of an unfolding drama. You may even be drawn through the looking glass to live your story.

Do you need to first make an outline? Depends. Many best selling authors have told me that they create characters, place them in the scenery, and then sit back and watch the story come to life. They believe that outlines are like straight jackets, and that they restrict the myriad of paths a plot can follow. Even relatively new authors are often awestruck at how their protagonists and antagonists take over and weave the tale. Clive Cussler (*Valhalla Rising*, *Atlantis Found*, *Inca Gold*, and whose book, *Sahara*, was released as a major film in 2004) asks, "What's an outline?" My kinda guy

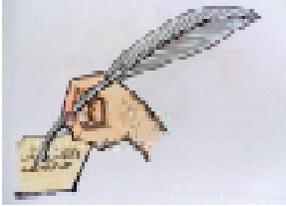
That is not to say that novelists like Craig Thomas (*Firefox Down!*, *Lion's Run*, *Jade Tiger*) don't exist. Craig says his carefully researched and plotted outlines are only a few pages short of his finished novel's length. Jeffery Deaver's plots (*The Bone Collector*, *Coffin Dancer*, *Empty Chair*) are so intricate that he must plan every twist and turn.

If you haven't experienced the magic, don't be afraid. Write something, anything. How about, "It was a dark and stormy night" for a start? Corny? You bet, but now the juices are flowing. Add a line; "Jessica wasn't sure if the sheer drop off was to her left or right or straight ahead. The only certainty was the sound of the trees behind her being smashed and tossed aside as the creature neared. She made her choice and began to run."

Magic. Did she make the right choice? What was the creature? Why was it chasing her? Does she escape? I wrote those few line and then stopped. I don't have the answers, but had I continued a paragraph or two more, Jessica and the creature would have told me the end. Magic.

Do you have the gift of writing?

"What?" you say. "Can't just anybody write?" Sure, but can just anybody write well enough that other anybodies would want to read their work...that is the real question. The answer lies in the fact that each of us has been given particular gifts that we are expected to use for the greater good within our sphere of influence. For serious writers, that sphere is called planet Earth. There are great teachers, speakers, caretakers, and ministers, for instance, who might be well equipped for their type of work, but would possibly fail if they were asked to perform as writers. They come to us for help in putting their mission in print.



If you have written prose or poetry or nonfiction articles that have been favorably accepted by readers without bias for or against you, and you have made them think...you are a writer—but at what level? Stephen King, in his book *On Writing*, cuts to the chase. On page 142, he writes:

"While it is impossible to make a competent writer out of a bad writer, and while it is equally impossible to make a great writer out of a good one, it is possible, with lots of hard work, dedication, and timely help, to make a good writer out of a merely competent one."

Time will tell whether you are competent, good, really good, or Shakespeare II. Nevertheless, if people enjoy reading your work and come back for more, you have something unique going for you. There are, and will be, days when you sit at your computer, or pick up your legal pad and well-chewed Bic pen to write, when you encounter a touch of doubt or even fear that the writing task is beyond you. Throughout history, even the most famous of authors have shared that same moment with you, but they turned their face to the future and rode into history. You may never make history in the same way (then again, you might), but remember that you are already among the chosen few who are privileged to say "I Am A Writer." In fact, say it out loud now—I AM A WRITER! Awesome. Write on, R.T. Byrum

You're Never Too Old

Too often have I heard from someone my age (don't even ask) or even younger, "I'm just too old to think of becoming a writer." Thanks for making me feel even older. Listen, you need to have a lot of living behind you to have the most valuable resources of all, experience.



How difficult would it be to write a love story if you had no inkling of what that was like? How realistic do you think your war stories would be if your only input were from others? You might have all the facts in place, but could you really describe the feeling of looking deep into the soul of that special person who has just come into your life? How could you picture the noise, the smell, and the searing visions of battle if you had not been there?

If you have enough breath to still fog a mirror and have the gift of telling a story, then age should never be used as an excuse to leave the world without a record that only you can write.

What would literature be like if the following authors had thought they were too old to pick up the pen and write?

- Emerson produced *English Traits* when he was 53 and *Conduct of Life* at 59.
- Kent wrote his *Anthropology*, *Metaphysics of Ethics*, and *Strife of the Faculties* at 74.

- Oliver Wendell Holmes at 79 wrote *Over the Teacups*.
- Victor Hugo wrote *Les Miserables* at 62.
- Booth Tarkington wrote 16 novels after age 60, some of them when he was totally blind.
- George Bernard Shaw wrote some of his famous plays at 80.
- Scott the commentator began study of Hebrew at 87.
- Jules Verne was still writing his stories at 63.
- Croce the Italian philosopher published two of his works on philosophy at age 85.
- Santayana, the famous Harvard philosopher, continued writing at 88 years of age.
- Tennyson at 83 wrote, *Crossing the Bar*.
- Webster's monumental dictionary was written when he was 70.

Now plop yourself down at your desk or computer, and let's have no more nonsense about being too old.

Just Sit Down And Begin Writing

Even though a seven hundred-page book seems like an impossible task, consider that writing just two pages per day will complete a book of that size in one year. In a lesser way, the idea of cranking out a 1,000-word article on vacation planning can be dauntingly stressful as well.

The late Marion Zimmer Bradley advocated sitting down and just writing if you want to get those ideas out of your head on paper. Procrastination is the enemy of creativity. Writers have a tendency to wait until deadlines crack the whip before penning or typing the first word. Hey, I've been guilty of that myself and there is a price to pay. Not only does stress build up as the deadline approaches, but it can also become a problem of quality when a person feels rushed. There is no magic secret to our craft. Like any other pursuit of value in an art, it takes ten percent inspiration or talent, and ninety percent hard work. There is a goal to every book, article, poem, or screenplay—to physically or virtually type "The End" to your work. Agnes de Mille said that it means working every day—bored, tired, weary, or with a fever of a hundred and two.



Stephen King agrees with Marion in his book *On Writing* in discussing professional training. He says to forget the "creative writing" classes in school or college; if the writer is a good-selling professional he should be selling, not teaching, and if he isn't, he has nothing to teach you.

That, of course, includes for extensive mail order writing courses. Some of them are very good, but an extension course in fiction technique at a local university will do just as much for you for a quarter or less of the price.

Like most professional writers, King and Bradley also advised staying out of amateur writing workshops where amateurs sit around and read their failures to each other. Twenty times zero is still zero, so writers should never listen to criticism from anyone unless they can sign a check. Never mind what your best friend, your aunt, or your English teacher thinks. Publishers and editors and agents give professional criticism. After all, that's who makes a living by knowing how to judge good writing. Writing groups, which often have a mix of experienced writers, can, however, be valuable in early stages of critique.

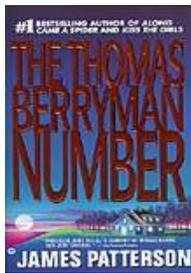
When it comes to writing novels, Bradley suggested reading a couple of good books on technique. She recommended to her own students a good book by Dean Koontz called *Writing*

Popular Fiction. Lawrence Block's *The Novel From Plot To Print* is another good one. So is a book called *One Way To Write Your Novel*, by Dick Perry. All of these are published by Writer's Digest.

What happens after you've finished the book or article and have done due diligence in reviewing and revising the content? Send it to an editor who publishes that kind of work. You really don't need an agent until you have a good track record of sales; in fact, most reputable agents won't touch you till you have sold a lot of work. The kind of agent a beginner can get, you're better off without. Thanks, Marion, Agnes, and Stephen

A Best-Selling Author's Story

Even before we get into later chapters on writing a novel, I thought you might enjoy this story from one of my favorite authors who has an article on his website that gives us a chance to feel what it's like to finally have your writing accepted by a famous publishing house. James Patterson's characters are so human as both the good or the bad guys. I highly recommend reading him for style and dialogue.



Quoted From Patterson's website:

"I don't know if any of you have tried writing novels but it's very difficult even after you've done the work and your manuscript's sitting there, finished. Somewhere in your mind you've decided it's good. You still have doubts. You don't know if it will find an audience. You don't know if publishers will even look at it. You don't know if it will sell a single copy.

"Let me share the experience of one of the most important letters I have ever received—the accepting of my first novel, *The Thomas Berryman Number*.

"And when, as happened with me, you've gotten 31 publishing houses to say "no" to it—even in nicely worded letters that weren't all form-letter rejections—these doubts only get bigger. So when I got that letter from the editor-in-chief of Little, Brown and Company, saying he wanted the book, well . . . it blew my little mind and then changed my life.

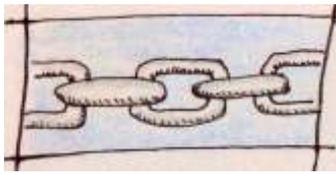
"Here was a guy who had worked with Norman Mailer and John Fowles writing to say he liked the book—*loved* the book . . . it was just incredible. I held that letter in front of me and I realized I could do it. I held that letter and I believed I could do it. I could be a writer for the rest of my life. I *was* a writer.

"My editor invited me to Boston where he had an incredible office on Beacon Hill. It was like this 100 year-old library. I remember sitting in front of a roaring fire on the first floor and looking around me. The shelves were stuffed with first editions of books including *Catcher in the Rye* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Then the editor came down these creaky old wooden stairs and I nervously folded the letter (which I'd been carrying around like a good luck charm) and slid it into my jacket pocket. I shook his hand and, well, the rest is history." <http://www.jamespatterson.com/>. History, indeed. James Patterson has had more than two-dozen of his novels appear at the top of the bestsellers list.

Links For Serious Writers

Our ongoing purpose in this feature throughout the book is to provide you with links that will guide you to conferences, seminars, on-line courses, writing helps, contests, and lots of sources for freelance work. If you want to consider taking an online course (even if King advises against it) try these:

Courses: <http://writersvillage.com/preview/?source=Overture26> This online writers group is offering over 200 courses to members at very reasonable cost. They cover fiction, comedy, literature, poetry and non-fiction.



<http://www.HalZinaBennett.com> Conducts regular writing workshops in Atlanta. Access this website often for dates, locations and content. Costs vary from \$170 up.

<http://www.writersonlineworkshops.com> Online instruction in: Fiction, Business of Writing, Grammar, Composition, Poetry, Life Stories, Nonfiction. Now, get all the professional writing instruction you'll ever need without leaving home!

Whether you need to brush up on the basics, want to start writing poetry or have a particular problem with your novel, you'll find just the class you need at Writers Online Workshops, from the publisher of Writer's Digest.

<http://www.writers.com/> This site on the Net has been offering online writing classes since 1995 -- the first private writing school on the Internet. Whether you simply have a passion for writing and want to learn more or have a specific interest (creative writing, fiction, nonfiction, playwriting, poetry, screen writing, journaling, autobiography, memoir, travel writing, writing for children, genres like mystery, science fiction, fantasy, and horror) we can help you improve your skills and explore new directions. We also offer unique writing classes relating to spiritual and personal growth. All our instructors are experienced teachers as well as published professional writers.

Writing Helps:

<http://www.bookcoaching.com/freearticles/article-83.shtml>

Great article on overcoming writer's block.

<http://www.bookcoaching.com/freearticles/article-39.shtml>

How to turn your experiences into cash.

Freelance Writing Sources:

<http://www.freelancewriting.com/forumdir/fjb/index.html>

Check out posted jobs or advertise your freelance writing services. Contains lots of interesting information for freelancers.

Annual Writing Conferences:

As of this writing, the following writers' conferences are being held on an annual basis. Even if a conference is over by the time you read about it in *The Serious Writer*, you can still visit their website to learn about the next one to be held.

The Writers' Institute the 18th annual get-together in 2007 was held April 27-29 in Madison, Wisconsin. Fiction and non-fiction writers met with literary agents and learned from authors like Pulitzer Prize-winner, David Maraniss. For details of future events go to <http://www.dcs.wisc.edu/LSA/writing/awi/index.html>



You, like even the best-selling authors, will probably get a few of these:

"Are you questioning me, your friendly publishing editor about this li'l ole rejection slip?"

Getting Past Writer's Block

All writers at one time or another seem to be knocking heads against a wall that is too high to scale and too wide to skirt around. The name engraved on that wall is "Writer's block" and the stones that make up the construction are labeled: too tired, loss of inspiration, lack of faith, other priorities, interruptions, etc. Lest you think that only affects novelists, I assure that assignments for articles, poetry, and nonfiction work can suffer the same obstacles.



Consider the case of the Scottish physician, A. J. Cronin, who was forced by illness, to take a leave of absence from his medical practice. Deciding to use the time to write a novel, he labored through the first half, but became disheartened and threw the manuscript into the trashcan.

Discouraged with his effort as a writer, Cronin decided to walk through the Scottish Highlands where he saw a man digging in a bog in an attempt to drain it for use as a pasture. Cronin struck up a conversation with him, and the man said, "My father dug at this bog and never made it into a pasture. But my father knew and I know that it's only by digging you can make a pasture—so I keep on digging."

Cronin felt rebuked by the man's attempts, but was also remotivated. He returned home, pulled his manuscript out of the trash, and finished his novel, *Hatter's Castle*, which sold over 3 million copies. Cronin then left his medical practice, and became a world-famous writer.

Writing is hard work and the pay is often poor for the effort put into it. Still, since the gift is bestowed on those whom God has chosen, then it follows that we owe Him our best endeavors to carry out our ministry of communicating ideas.

A segment about overcoming has little value, unless it also offers ways of getting around or over that wall. Here are a few ideas, including, with her permission, some great tips from Ms Partner, ContentRobot © 2006-2007.

- Are you more productive in the morning? Then schedule the tasks where you are more unlikely to procrastinate! Keep a balance between work and family so you aren't unfocused with the task at hand.
- Try writing in different places, at different times, and with different writing instruments. Get a better chair, desk, or computer that provides productivity instead of distraction.
- Choose a keyword or idea, and then write down associated ideas and words in clusters around it. This type of mind mapping often forms new ideas
- Break the job into manageable pieces and do the easy stuff first. By building momentum and confidence, your progress can be a motivation.
- Take a break and relax. Stress makes it harder to think clearly. Don't feel compelled to sit hour after non-productive hour. Talk to someone, get some fresh air, drink some coffee, or do whatever you need to re-energize
- Establish a writing routine. Wear comfortable clothes, listen to mood music, and make notes in longhand with your favorite pen.
- Write quickly, without regard for spelling and grammar. Revisions can take place after inspiration takes a rest.
- Reread what you've already written. Sometimes a running start can get a writer the inertia to leap over the wall.

- Think of the rewards and you will stave off punishment, keep others happy, and head closer to your goals...financial and otherwise

Famous science-fiction writer, Ray Bradbury, who in his book, *Zen and the Art of Writing*, admits that he, had written over 3 million words before he was ever published.

Now, get back to work on that manuscript.

The Writing Game

“Me hooked on writing? Nosiree—I can give it up anytime I want to.”



CHAPTER FIVE

LET'S WRITE THAT NOVEL—PICKING A GENRE

Take a deep breath and let's begin

At one time or another, most of us (especially we writers) have threatened to some day write that novel that buzzes around inside our head from time to time. It may be based on a true-life story of our own or that of family or friend, or a public or historical character. On the other hand, we may want to make up the characters, the location(s) of the story, the major and minor conflicts, and the final resolution—everything from scratch.

Read on as we explore the major elements of fiction writing, both from my personal experiences and from those of best selling authors. While not neglecting all the other avenues of writing and subjects dealing with improving your craft, I want to help you lay the groundwork so that some day (if you haven't already done so) you can say, "I said I would write my novel, and here it is!!"

To begin this segment on creating your novel, we must first discuss choosing your genre since developing the premise and the plot, and doing the organization, outline, research, writing and revising will be driven by the type of fiction you wish to write. How does one decide on a genre' and what then? Read on.

Ready, Set, Write? — Wrong!

First, like for any journey, we need a starting place, a destination, and a map connecting the two. Sure, you could type away like the fictional herd of monkeys in pursuit of accidentally writing a best seller, but that just isn't the real world. Elsewhere, there are hundreds of serious



writers competing for the few slots available in the marketplace. The successful ones know that writing is an art that drives them to create, but they also know that it's a business. So, let's start our novel the right way, avoiding the inevitable tossing out our first attempt as an author because we were not prepared in the beginning.

Okay, a little honesty. There are many kinds of writers: newspaper columnists, magazine article contributors, greeting card creators, poets, historians, etc., who excel in their field, but will never be able to write a novel. Maybe that includes you, even so, the lessons to be learned in fiction writing have application across the spectrum, so don't skip over any page of this book.

Another truth: novel writing is a process that can be learned to the degree that a person's natural gift allows. Stephen King wrote that a competent writer can become a good writer, and a good one can grow into a better one, but a better writer can never become a great writer if not born with the gift. Stephen King, who, love him or hate him, is no literary giant, but no one can argue with his success as a better than average writer.

Literary giants are like Mozart and Handel were to music. They sit at different types keyboards, and masterpieces happen. At a recent seminar, I related the story of how a young man met Mozart and asked what he needed to know to write a symphony like the maestro had done when he was a young man.

Mozart said, "Why not start with a concerto?"

The young man said, "but you wrote your first symphony when you were only nine."

"That's true," agreed Mozart, "but I didn't have to ask how to do it."

Now, let's find out where you fit in the ranks by determining the type of writing that you can do best. Then we will methodically begin building, a premise, a plot, characters and all of the other elements in an orderly fashion.

Finally, the day will come when you can sit at your keyboard (or with pencil poised over your legal pad if that's your choice) and watch the first stirring lines of drama march across the page.

How Do I Determine My Genre'?

Genre' is a French word that means kind or type of literary work. There seems to be no purpose in using a foreign term except to impress other writers or awestruck fans. Now that you are impressed with my command of French, I'll use "type" of work from now on. How do you decide the type of fiction that you want to write? What if you enjoy more than one type? Let's look at your bookshelf.



Pull a dozen or so of your favorite novels from your bookshelves (or go to the library) and spread them out on your dining room (or kitchen table.) Now sort them according to type: romance, mystery, adventure, science fiction, detective, historical novels, fantasy, children's storybooks, young adult...I think that covers most of them.

Arrange the piles in order according to the types you enjoyed the most. Pull more books if you need a consensus. Now, take your first choice and pick your favorite author in that pile. Chances are more than one of the novels will be by a certain author.

A pattern should have emerged. A certain type of novel, and a particular author probably has surfaced. If you like to read from that pile more than any other, then something in your life craves what those books offer. A writer's reading choice often drives the most successful to follow suit with their own writing.

What should you do now? Read several more books in your chosen kind of novel and cement your selection. Only go to your second choice if you don't feel a tingle in your fingers to jump into the race.

You need to do some grunt work in analyzing the physical books in your type of novel. As you study the next two articles of choosing and targeting your market, you'll learn how to profile the books you've decided to emulate so that you have an idea of the physical layout, size, word count, etc. that the publishers of the books were looking for. Keep everything that you learn about your favorite type of novel in a handy notebook as a reference.

I can't stress the importance of making these initial steps before doing anything else. The reasons will become very clear as you beginning churning out those deathless lines of prose. (Hey, that's what I thought about my own writing...before my editor sat me down hard.) However, that's for a later time. Take care of this first set of tasks for now and then we can continue.

Choosing Your Market

The first thing a budding novelist or writer of articles should do is carefully analyze the market for whatever genre (sorry, "type") that he or she wishes to target. As a writer, do you favor nonfiction, how-to articles, children's or young adult literature, adventure, romance, historical, science fiction, detective, mystery, or the ubiquitous "none of the above?"

Who would be your major competition? Remember that the best sellers in your chosen field of writing already have a huge market share and a continuing following. Are you good enough to carve some of that share away from them?



My Carver Cousin novels are written without the negative influences often given to young adults

How about a second choice where you might have a better chance to shine? Once you've made your name as an author, you can always branch out to other markets.

My decision in writing novels came from seeing the types of books being sold to teens at their most vulnerable time of life. Books filled with sex, violence, horror, drugs, the occult, and even disrespect for parents and the law. No one could convince me that such writing has little or no effect on a young person's character.

Some of those same books become the springboard for games and movies that can magnify the harm. The increasing number of school shootings, rape, and murder by young people has already been tied in many cases to their

gaming, reading and viewing habits.

I was raised on the Hardy Boys. The books are filled with high adventure and, yes, there are moments of mayhem and murder, but not gratuitous violence. As a novelist friend of mine once said, "If someone gets beat up or even killed in my books, it's because they deserved it." Throughout the series, the Hardy boys and friends always maintain respect for morality.

The Carver Cousins series were created with the intent of presenting today's youth with a modern version of those old classics. Each story is filled with gadgets like ATV's, computers, homebuilt airplanes, personal watercraft, paramotors, hang gliders, and a few amazing inventions that are real and in the testing stage already.

In addition to three already published, I've completed five more to be released on a regular basis. The exciting news is that a major motion picture studio contacted my publisher about possible film and TV rights on the first two. You may read a few sample chapters by searching for R.T. Byrum at <http://www.amazon.com/>. You may also use the form at the back of *The Serious Writer* to order a hard copy or an Ebook if you wish.

Anyhow, that's how I picked my market. Next, I'll help you pick yours.

What Is YOUR Target Market?

One ancient piece of advice to writers is: "Write What You Know," If you're like me, you will run out of ideas pretty quickly if that is your only inspiration. Thanks to modern libraries and the Internet, we can all become Subject Matter Experts (SME's). That means we are not limited in knowledge and experience.

Let's say you are fascinated by science fiction, but have no background in Quantum Physics or any idea how $E=MC^2$ affects people traveling at the speed of light. No problem, using your favorite search engine, you can put together a story that will be convincing to all but the most die-hard purists.

Ah, but that same ease of research is available to your reader, and they will lose confidence in you if your use of facts is faulty. Should you stubbornly insist on writing beyond your own understanding, you can also seek help from professionals in the field to verify your premises.

A more realistic approach would be to look at other types novels that you enjoy and would feel comfortable in authoring. For example, suppose you are a fan of Mary Higgins Clark (The Cradle Will Fall, I'll Be Seeing You) and her style of sleuthing novels.

Collect three or four of her books that are about the same physical size. Answer the following questions:

- How high, wide, and thick is the book?
- How many pages?
- How many chapters?
- How many pages per chapter?
- How many words in the book? *

** To estimate total words, count characters and spaces in one full line, and divide by 4.5. Then multiply the result by the number of lines on one full page. Finally, multiply that answer by the number of story pages in the book. Give or take 1,000 or so words for partial pages that will give you the number of words in the book.*

The next step is to study describe in one or two sentences what each chapter or part of the chapter is about.

Example: Chapter I, Part I—Henry (former US President) and Sandra Parker, husband and wife sleuths, read that a close friend and ally, Thomas Shipman, had been indicted for the murder of his lover.

Part II—Thomas is meeting with his lawyer when the Parkers arrive to help.

Part III—Over dinner, the three discuss the murder and Thomas's innocence.

As you continue on through the several books, you will begin to see a pattern of how the crisis is first introduced, the plot develops, sub plots complicate the solution, characters grow or erode, sub plots and then the main plot resolves, and the ending, happy or otherwise closes the story.

That pattern becomes a template for study, because it is the pattern used by the successful author. Clive Cussler, best-selling author of 27 novels, said that the most valuable school for writers is to discover what they like or dislike about their favorite novelists, adapt what is learned to their own style, and then sit down and write.

There are incredible stories of authors who make it big with their first books. That's like playing the lottery. The author whose work you are studying is still your competition, along with

others in that genre. However, you still must get in the water if you wish to swim with the big fishes.

Yes, having a friend in the business that can push you ahead of the thousands waiting in line for their chance at fame is one answer. Nevertheless, that only works once unless you have written a blockbuster.

Another is having a topical book that is tied to a current event. Timing is everything in that case, and fame is fleeting just like the event. Remember 9-11?

In summary, write what you like to read, and analyze and study the authors who enthrall you with their work. Then, work as though there is no one that can keep you from succeeding. It may take years, but if you are even a competent writer and work on becoming at least a good writer, you can have a future using your gift.

Getting Ideas For A Fiction Story

How does one get started writing fiction if one has never done that before? It's not as difficult



as you might think. If you think back, you've probably told stories to your siblings or friends as a youngster, and to your children as a parent. Where did those plots and characters come from? From your own experiences, your memories, or even rewrites from stories you've read or heard.

Here are some of the sources that have been used by successful writers to start the creative juices flowing. You may be inspired to add a few of your own when you see how close at hand these resources can be.

- **Personal Experiences:** Expand your memories with "What if...?" situations. For example; a visit to the dentist, a cruise to the islands, or hunting for a job. What if your hero runs into his high school sweetheart and both are single? What if after buying a house and ripping out the walls to do a makeover, it's discovered that a long gone owner had nailed movie posters to the lathing to stop drafts—and they were worth a fortune (actually happened), a massive rock in your new home's front yard turns out to contain the world's largest emeralds (true story.)
- **Word play with potential titles:** All of my books started with a working title that acted as a catalyst to keep me inspired. (Mystery of the Shrieking Island, Creature from Dead Man's Reef, The Phantom Bridge, Flight Into Terror, etc.) One suggestion is to do a take off on clichés: All's Well that Bends Well (a story based on aerobics), "A Switch in Time" (daylight savings creates a crisis in a time critical event.)
- **Current and old newspapers and magazine articles:** National Geographics magazines are awesome sources for ideas and are filled with pictures and descriptions of locations. One story was about Old Ironsides, the Navy ship whose real name was the U.S.S. Constitution. The pictures, details of construction and historical facts could be the springboard for a wonderful story based on historical fact.
- **Snapshots:** Ideas that spring from the little boxed articles filled with odd facts found in most newspapers. One example is an article on how people who work in cubicles tend to make them an extension of their homes. What kind of story could you spin off of the unusual décor of a very strange co-worker?

- **Table of Contents:** Borrow a chapter title from a novel or non-fiction book. Here are several I found: Stargazer, Disappearing Act, Black Pearl, Heartburn, The Friend, Novotny's Pain, Sorry, Right Number, Nuts in the Fruitcake, and Collision Course!
- **Eavesdropping:** Hey, don't feel guilty. If people speak loudly enough for you to overhear, then take advantage of the snippets of information that hang in the air. Author McPherson overheard a man talking about two teens who cleared more than \$200,000 in one year selling chocolates over the Internet. He wrote "The Sweet Taste of Success" for a newspaper.
- **The Calendar:** Write down what people think about and do in each month and follow the thread to a story line. October—Halloween, December—Christmas, June—cooking out, February—Valentines Day, etc.

There's a start. If you belong to a writers group (and you should) perhaps you could suggest having a round table discussion to play "What if" to drum up ideas. Writing fiction is exciting and fun. Remember, you are creating characters and situations and locations that would not exist if it were not for you and your gift.

The Importance Of The Right Title

Walk into a library or a bookstore and look around. Now imagine your book, competing with all the rest for the reader's attention. What can you do to make your novel stand out and say,

"Open me first?" Well, until you've achieved fame as an author, it will be your title that will attract the browser. Once the person enters your book, and, assuming that you grab his interest with the first line or two of your story, you have a customer, and you have a reader, and you may even have a fan.



But, even before your book is seen by the public, you must first impress (a) your agent, if you have one, and, (b) your editor at the publishing house. They, too, may be swayed one way or another by your title.

You may be asking, "Okay, R.T., where do these magic words come from that will act as my unpaid and untiring sales representatives?" First, let me suggest where NOT to find them. Don't use overworked sayings or clichés, dated event phrases (unless you are writing about 911, or similar short lead subjects), or titles from popular songs.

James Patterson's Alex Cross novels use titles like; Pop Goes the Weasel, When the Wind Blows, Along Came a Spider, and Cradle and All. A new author may have difficulty in using those popular words, but Patterson fans know the twists and turns that James writes in his books, and they sell.

Some authors will admit that choosing a title can be one of the most difficult tasks in the writing of a novel, while other enjoy the exercise. Each of my Carver Cousin novels took form after an unusual title popped into my mind. Here, for example, are the ones that launched the first seven of my young adult series:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| Mystery of the Shrieking Island | The Phantom Bridge |
| Flight Into Terror | In the Devil's Eye |
| Creature from Dead Man's Reef | Danger in the Desert |
| On a Dead Man's Chest | |

The titles came from thin air, but piqued my interest and drove the story through the next 50,000 or more words. Incidentally, none of the titles were changed when the books were finished except my very first. It started out as “The Secret of the Whispering Mountain” but evolved into a different story and title. Hey, it was my first novel and I made a lot of changes as I went along. (Secret aside...I still make a lot of changes; I’ve never told anyone except you.)

Before I go through sources of titles that do work, let me stress that you don’t need a title to begin or even to end a book. Since the story may take on a life of its own during the writing, the original title may be totally wrong for the finished work.

Many authors use working titles to refer to their book until the very end. For example, I could have temporarily called my first book, *The Island Adventure*, or book three, *The Terrorists*. Keep in mind that your agent or publisher may still decide that there is a more saleable title than the one you pick. Don’t let pride keep you from taking advice from those who know how to sell books.

Okay, here are some positive sources of titles:

- The theme of your novel (Agatha Christie’s *Murder She Wrote*)
- The name or names of your main actors (*Romeo and Juliet*)
- The location of your story (Michener’s *Texas*, Clive Cussler’s *Sahara*)
- Nursery rhymes (Patterson’s *Kiss the Girls*)
- Place where action is centered (Daphne du Maurier’s *Jamaica Inn*)
- A combination of place and theme (Edgar Allen Poe’s *Murders in the Rue Morgue*)
- Humorous titles that suggest a theme for the book (Erma Bombeck’s *The Grass Is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank*)
- A twist on a popular saying (Instead of *The early bird gets the worm*, try *The Early Worm*)
- Mysterious titles (William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* or Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Pit and the Pendulum*)
- A line from your novel (Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*)
- Pegged to a common theme (Sue Grafton’s *A is for Alibi*, *K is for Killer*, etc.)
- The Bible (Hemmingway’s *Absalom, Absalom!*)

Of course there are countless other ways to discover titles for your work, but be careful of trying to be too clever. One example was a novel about Joan of Arc. The author was not happy that the editor did not accept her witty title, *Joan Fahrenheit*.

I know this is a long article about titles, but, perhaps, that will serve to show how important that single line of text can be to having your novel pulled off the shelf next to a less illustrious title.

A final word on this subject (at least for now): you can submit a book labeled, “Untitled Manuscript” if you’re up against a deadline. The agent or editor who reads the work may have an idea that you can use. Still, it’s to your advantage to have a suggestion to go along with

your book. DO NOT send a list of titles, however, since such indecision can paint a wishy washy picture of your novel.

Here's an exercise for you. Look through your own bookshelf or visit a library or bookstore and write down all of the titles that you find interesting enough that you would browse through and, perhaps, end up buying the novel.

Then sit down and decide what it is about your top choices that attracted you. Next, share your list with several others and get their input. Common points of interest between you and your fellow judges can offer powerful clues as to what you need in choosing what you want to have on the spine of your book, the first thing that a potential reader will see in a bookstore.

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