

Write, Edit, Publish

The Best of The Jessica Dall Blog

© 2014 Jessica Dall

Table of Contents

Introduction.....

Section One: Writing

Getting Started	5
Writing Prompts.....	5
Finding Time to Write.....	7
Writing through Writer's Block.....	11
Inner Filters.....	16
Character Naming	20
What's in a Name?.....	20
Historical Naming.....	23
Who are you, again?.....	28
Plotting	30
From Premise to Plot.....	30
"Accidental Plagiarism".....	34
[X] Types of Plot.....	37
Characterization	44
Making Your Characters Believable.....	44
Character Flaws.....	46
"Plot Device" Disorders.....	49
Just a Pretty Face.....	53
Dialogue	57
You Don't Say.....	57
Floating Dialogue.....	61
Narrative	68
Writing Shakespeare.....	69
Head Jumping.....	73

Section Two: Editing

Editing 101.....	78
Plot and Plot Holes	82
The Ever-Dreaded Plot Holes.....	82
A Wizard Did It.....	88

That's Just...Wrong.....	92
Language	96
The Problem with Pronouns	96
The Unneeded Words.....	100
All of a sudden, he was suddenly there.....	107
Critique Groups	110
How to Take a Critique	110
Crises of Confidence.....	115
The Nitty-Gritty	122
Does Length Matter?.....	122
Eh, it's not my style	127
"Intensive Purposes"	135

Section Three: Publishing

Self, Vanity, Traditional Publishing	141
Shoot the Shaggy Dog.....	143
Submissions	147
How to Get Published	147
Submissions 101	150
Wishlists and Trends.....	163
Word Counts	167
Word Limits.....	167
Copyrights and Contracts	172
Contracts.....	172
Novel Blogs	176
Toe Tappin' Copyrights	180
Layout	184
Novel Layout Tips	184

About the Author.....

Introduction

When starting my blog almost three years ago, I never put much thought into what it might become—it was simply a platform to share all the random thoughts that popped into my head while writing or editing, and answering those questions I got time and time again from new writers.

Now, with thousands of readers and questions coming from all over, I have compiled some of the most popular articles into a handy, carry-with-you eBook. While writing (and publishing as a whole) is an ever-changing beast, these articles will hopefully get those starting out—or those just trying to make their writing better—a good place to begin when going from a blank page to a published novel.

Past blog posts have been categorized into one of three major steps in that endeavor—writing the manuscript, editing it, or getting ready to attempt publication. Much like the original blog, they are able to be read together or individually as needed.

The next three years will no doubt bring more blog posts and more changes, but for now, I present to you *Write, Edit, Publish: The Best of The Jessica Dall Blog*.

Section One: Writing

Whether your first book or your fiftieth, the first thing you have to do on the quest toward publication is get the words down on the page. After all, editing can fix many writing sins...but it can't fix not having anything written in the first place. From coming up with a plot to tweaking dialogue, here are tips to get you on your way to a completed manuscript.

Getting Started

Writing Prompts

Confession time, I have never taken a “true” creative writing course (one where they teach you “how to write”). As a creative writing teacher, I obviously have no problem with the idea of creative writing classes, but there is one major reason I have avoided standard creative writing courses like the plague.

I can't stand writing prompts.

When I'm given something like “Your character opens their front door and finds a baby. Write that story.” It feels like I hardly ever end up with anything worthwhile. That doesn't mean, however,

that I don't sometimes need some inspiration after a dry spell.

As I'm sure most people know, there are plenty of writing prompt generators available online, but for those like me who don't like "standard" writing prompts ("What would happen if your character suddenly turned into a dog?") there are a few other sources of inspiration. Consider:

1. What ifs: These are always fun. What if zombies were an endangered species protected by law? What if we're all the dream of an eight-year-old girl? Similar to regular prompts, "what ifs" leave more room for originality. You aren't directed to write X, you don't even have to write that exact "what if", they just give you a place to start to let your mind wander.

2. Pictures: Rather than just general prompts, I often find pictures help give me more ideas than "write this story". Though it wasn't entirely inspired by a picture, the first scene from my novel, *The Copper Witch*, came to me after looking at Pre-Raphaelite Frank Cadogan Cowper's painting "*Vanity*." That painting is, in fact, the entire reason main character, Antony, is a painter in the story. That picture sparked off the idea, and the rest is history.

To use this strategy, it is possible to find "picture prompt" sites, or you can just click around Google

Images until you find something that strikes you (as I generally have my students do).

3. Song Lyrics: Perhaps my favorite in terms of generating random ideas. While you don't want to quote actual song lyrics in a book (can get into nasty, nasty copyright infringement suits that way) I've always found lines to be a good for inspiration. My other novel, *The Bleeding Crowd*, is a good example. The plot and characters weren't inspired by a song lyric, but the title was inspired by the song "Easy to be Hard" from the musical *Hair*, and that shaped how the two main characters related to each other and their political causes.

I don't actually know if there is a site that lists song lyrics as novel prompts, but by listening to whatever music you prefer, it's possible to pick out your own lyrics you find inspiring and start a list that can give inspiration when you come to a writing roadblock.

Finding Time to Write

All right, all cards on the table, just writing the title for this blog felt a little hypocritical right now. I have written maybe a paragraph of my own writing in the past week. Life just sometimes gets in the way. Perhaps you really want to write, have a great idea, are ready to go...but your kids need to be taken to karate, and dinner needs to be made, and

you just finished a 70-hour work week, and you really should walk the dog... I understand, believe me, I understand. There are hundreds of things in life that take up time, and with less than 170 hours in a week, that hour you spend in traffic each way to and from work can really start adding up.

So what do you do when you don't have the time to go to a writer's retreat for a week, or even just spend the afternoon somewhere with no interruptions?

1. Always carry pen and paper. This works best for those writers who like handwriting over typing, but it works for just about any writer on the go. The last time I had a solid 40 minutes to write, I was sitting at a cafe waiting for a friend who had overslept our brunch date. While waiting for people who are late is never fun, while she was doing her best to get there, I had 40 minutes to sit and write, because I had a pen and notebook in my bag. If you don't have the ability to carry even a small notebook with you (small Moleskines or similar notepads are godsend for small bags/pockets) at least have a pen. In a scrape you can generally find something to write on, you just need to actually be able to write (after all, many great ideas have started written down on cocktail napkins or toilet paper).

2. Make writer-friendly choices. With the new move, I have now sadly gone from walking to work every day to actually having to commute. Luckily there are a few different ways I can go, the main

ones being driving the entire way (about half an hour, depending on traffic) or driving to a Metro stop and taking the train the rest of the way in (about forty minutes if the trains are running on time). While having the added benefit of being a little easier on my wallet, taking the Metro into work means that I have half an hour on a train to sit and write rather than half an hour focusing on the road.

Now, I know that changing up a commute might not work for everyone. Maybe you live somewhere that doesn't have available public transit, or you need your car with you, or taking public trans would change your commute from 15 minutes to 50 minutes...you definitely shouldn't make your life *harder* while trying to find time to write, but do your best to fit writing into times that would otherwise be busy. Maybe, if you drive an hour each way to work, you can get a recorder and dictate ideas. Maybe, if you spend your child's naptime watching television, you could try to write instead (or write while watching TV if you can multitask). Look at your day, and try to figure out if there are places where you're just sitting waiting or "killing time". It's likely you could get some writing in at those points.

3. Schedule "Writing Time". Routines can be a good thing when trying to find time for things. It's sometimes easier to motivate yourself when you've gotten "Every Tuesday from 7 to 7:30 is writing time" in your head. It can also help if you're the

type of writer that needs an uninterrupted stretch of time to actually work out a scene (some people don't work well with interruptions; it's just what your writing style is). Try to figure out if there's a quiet night, or morning, or anything else where you can spend some time writing. Then set the time aside and actually do it. It doesn't have to be hours on end, just try to give yourself half an hour Sunday morning, or Wednesday night, or whenever else you have the time, and get some writing in.

4. Make it a group activity. If you have some writer (or want-to-be writer) friends, and trying to maintain a social life is part of what's making it hard to find writing time, write-ins might be a great solution. A NaNoWriMo staple, a write-in is basically what it sounds like, a bunch of writers get together somewhere all carting laptops or pen/paper and then spend however long they can stay alternating between writing and talking (when you need a writing break of course). Having other people around also has the added bonus of giving you a little more motivation to actually *write* (libraries or local cafes are often good places for write-ins, including those in bookstores. Starbucks and [my personal favorite] Panera Bread are also great choices for their number of outlets and free wifi).

5. Remember your outside life is important too. Do you really just not have enough time to write, even after all of that? Would you have to stop seeing friends, or doing something else that you

love, to fit in even a couple of words while on the train to work? Then don't stress yourself. Writing will always be there, the rest of your life might not be. Allow yourself to take a break, and start writing again after you've finished wedding planning, or your kickball team's season is over, or when that big project at work is done. Just because you're a writer doesn't mean you don't get to have a life.

Writing through Writer's Block

As my twitter followers will know, this past July I was convinced to take part in Camp NaNoWriMo. An offshoot of the original NaNoWriMo (**N**ational **N**ovel **W**riting **M**onth), Camp NaNoWriMo aims to keep people writing through the summer by having two "sessions" (one in April, one in July) where "campers" can set their own word count goals. Unlike the 50,000 word goal of NaNoWriMo, campers can set goals anywhere from a few hundred words to over 100,000 for the month of April or July.

Having hit a snag on the third book of a trilogy I've been writing, I was convinced to join Camp this year—after all, that's what NaNoWriMo is about, giving yourself a hard deadline as motivation. Figuring I could at least do 1,000 words a day, I set my word count goal at 31,000 for the month and started away.

As always, the month started out well. Freshly motivated, I had a number of productive days that put me ahead of schedule. Newly confident, I even upped my goal to the standard 50,000. I churned out a few more scenes, full steam ahead...and then I was hit with writer's block. Hard. I had some vague idea of where I wanted the story to go from where I was, but how to keep going came up at a blank. A couple of days staring at a blinking cursor, and all of a sudden I was dropping behind rather drastically. Either I'd have to write or drop out all together.

And so I set out to vanquish (what fellow Camper, Leigh, cleverly referred to as) the Block-ness monster—which, as any writer will probably know, is easier said than done.

As with everything in writing, different things work for different people when it comes to how to get words down on the page. Some people even find it better to wait out a writer's block until they're inspired again. For those looking to blast their way through, however, here are a few tips:

1. Set a hard deadline. Some people thrive under pressure, some people don't. If you're the type who was never able to get a paper done in school until the night before it was due, a hard deadline might be just the thing to get you moving. The lucky out there might have a publisher breathing down their necks for a manuscript ("We contracted you for a

series! Where's book three?") But even you who don't have a contract forcing you to write, deadlines are still a viable option. You can take part in a program like NaNoWriMo, can join a writing group/have a writing partner to whom you feel accountable, or even just set a goal yourself (assuming you're able to keep yourself motivated with just that circle on the calendar). Would I have gotten through my writer's block without Camp NaNoWriMo? At some point, yes. Would it have been this week? Probably not.

2. Avoid distractions. Some people write best with music playing, some in a coffee shop, some in complete silence. Finding what works best for you really comes down to trial and error. The important thing is to figure out what does and doesn't allow you to write. Can you have a TV on in the background? Or do you start watching that instead of writing? Does having a wifi connection help with your research? Or does it mean you're spending your "writing time" on Facebook (or blogging). There are programs, such as Scrivener or Dark Room that provide "full screen" word processing (so you don't see all the other tabs and applications you might rather be playing with) if you find yourself distracted on a computer, or it might just be as simple as putting on noise-cancelling headphones with some Vivaldi and writing by hand if that is what helps you focus. The main thing is to be aware and figure out what is distracting you from actually writing.

3. Bribe yourself. I've heard it said, "It works for kids, why wouldn't it work for you?" Just like getting a child to sit still with the promise of a toy later on, rewards work really well when you're in a slump and can't seem to force yourself to write. Some writers do this with the basics (Once I hit 20,000 I can eat/sleep/perform some other basic function required to stay alive), some writers bribe with food (500 more words and I get that piece of chocolate cake in the fridge), some writers bribe with things (If I finish this chapter tonight, I'll buy myself that new pen I really wanted). Whatever works for you, setting a reward can help give you that last little nudge you need to keep going.

4. Jump around. Whether or not this one works really varies from person to person. Some people need to write chronologically for their stories to make sense. Others, however, might find it helpful to write the scenes that excite them and then go back to fill in all the middle parts. As long as you can force yourself to go back and do the middle parts later, jumping around to the scenes you like can at least get you back into the flow of writing. Just make sure you keep track of the scenes you have already written so you can fit them together later. Some writing programs such as previously mentioned Scrivener and yWriter offer platforms that allow writers to write scenes in separate chunks and then rearrange them once all the scene are written (the more advanced version of index cards and a bulletin board) but it is also possible to do so with just a normal word processor if you don't

want to buy/download a special program (personally, I open two documents, one the actual manuscript, one for scenes, and then title each scene I will put in later in the second document [KYLE MEETS JOHN, JOHN AND MARY FIGHT ABOUT KYLE, etc.] As long as they are all clearly titled, it's possible to fit them together into the first document with just a little more effort).

5. Just start writing. And when all else fails, there's always just writing until it starts to make sense. Perhaps more a pantsier thing (writers who “write by the seat of their pants” rather than outlining), this is finally what got me past my two-day writer's block for Camp NaNoWriMo. Not finding anywhere to jump to, not able to bribe myself, and as un-distracted as I was likely to get, the NaNo deadline at least motivated me to try putting words to paper—any words. While the first few hundred words were still like pulling teeth, and I'll likely cut most of what turned into a rambling monologue by the main character, it at least got me into the flow of writing. I topped out the day at 2,000 words (400 more than needed to stay on par with a 50,000 word goal daily) and even losing those words later, I at least ended up writing a scene that not only could fit with the plot, but one that got me back on track for the scene after that, and the next after that. First drafts are meant to be sloppy (it's why you don't write something and go straight to publishing). Even if you end up writing drivel, at least you have written something, and

that's the first step to get past your writer's block. As us WriMos say, "Fix it later."

Inner Filters

Today's question comes from a Twitter follower, reading: "@JessicaDall Q: What is the best mindset to avoid 'filtering'?"

Now, there are a couple of different ways filtering can be used when talking about writing. First, there's the idea of your character filtering everything that's happening through them before it gets to the reader, which of course makes for slow (most of the time weak) writing, for example:

"She saw the ball falling through the air. She heard the window shatter..."

Rather than:

"The ball fell through the air. The window shattered..."

Since the question asked about *mindset*, however, I'm going to venture to guess that it is asking about inner filters, or feeling the need to filter yourself before you even actually write a scene, character, or entire story for one reason or another.

There are plenty of reasons to feel the need to filter your writing. You might not feel comfortable writing certain sorts of scenes, something might feel too personal to put out there, or you might be much too aware that if you get this [novel/short story/play/etc.] published/produced you're going to have your sweet, conservative grandmother reading/seeing it.

Now, inner filters are not always a bad thing. In the same way that having a filter when out with people can keep you from losing friends, some level of filter keeps a controversial book from going from “edgy” to insulting. Filters become bad, however, when they keep you from actually writing a story that could be great if you could just get yourself to put it on paper.

So how can you get past those filters? Everyone has their own way of breaking through, but here are some suggestions:

1. Decide if the scene/character is actually necessary: Of course, this only works when it's a part of a story that's keeping you from writing, not the story itself, but if you have a half-finished story sitting somewhere lost on your computer (or in notebooks) and you just can't finish it because it's gotten to a point where you aren't comfortable writing it, figure out if the scene/character you're avoiding is actually needed. For example, I've never written erotica, and I'm not especially comfortable writing extremely in-depth sex scenes. Luckily,

there's no reason for me to stop writing just because I've come to a place where a sex scene might be called for. Just like there's no need to put a random sex scene in a story that doesn't call for it, there's no need to be graphic about what's happening if you don't want to be. After all, if you aren't comfortable writing about it, it probably isn't going to be very good anyway. Aren't comfortable about having a character tortured? If it isn't absolutely necessary, jump it. Aren't comfortable with the language a character uses? If it isn't necessary, cut it. Simple as that.

2. Pretend you're only writing for yourself:

Ok, you've looked back, and it's completely necessary for your character to swear up a storm based on how you've characterized him. You're okay with that, but you don't want your friends/parents/children/etc. to know that you even know those words, let alone see you use them. Pretend, at least for the time being, that you're only writing for yourself. Your eventual plan may be to publish, but for now, it's just you and the paper. Just because something's written doesn't mean it has to be read. I have written stories that I only finished because I didn't actually consider other people reading them. It was only after going back and rereading and editing that I even considered the possibility of it getting out there. If you are able to write something without worrying about other people seeing it, you'll be able to finish the story before thinking about things you might want to change. And it's possible, at that point, you'll realize

that character has changed, or even you won't want to change it any more.

3. Remember you can always use a pen name: This goes back to the earlier point, if you're filtering yourself because you have the fear of someone else reading it, you can always publish under a pseudonym. Tell those you don't mind reading it the name, for everyone else, it can just be a book by John Doe. It's up to you.

4. Have someone else look over it: Sometimes filtering comes from worrying about doing a touchy topic incorrectly more than having someone read the story in general. Perhaps you're filtering out a character who you originally imagined as bisexual because you don't want to be insulting, or someone with autism since all you know about that is from *Rainman*. That sort of filter can be good in some ways. There are certain things that people far too often overdo. Just because a character is homosexual does not mean that he thinks, "Girlfriend, those shoes are *fabulous*," or she only wants to wear flannel. Just because a character is clinically depressed doesn't mean that they are automatically goth, and just because a character is goth doesn't mean they're clinically depressed. If you aren't comfortable with writing a character because they are X or have Y, it doesn't mean you should filter yourself, though. It means you should have someone help you with that character who knows better than you.

5. Ask yourself if this is something you really want to write: So you've done everything else. You've talked to someone with X and know how to not be insulting, you've determined this scene is completely necessary to the plot, you're writing for yourself so you don't have to worry about what other people think, and...you're still filtering yourself. At this point, you really just have to ask if this is a story you are ready and willing to write. Perhaps it's a great story, it just isn't something you're comfortable with. Decide if it might not be better to just put it aside. It doesn't have to be forever, just until you're in a place to write it. After all, not being comfortable with your own story and characters just makes everything sound forced. You won't have a great story if everything you write sounds forced and stilted, no matter how amazing and timely the plot. Sometimes forcing writing just isn't worth it.

Character Naming

What's in a Name?

Today's blog post comes from us courtesy of Roxanne St. Claire. Roxanne wrote: "*Sometimes just changing a character's name changes everything. Just did that and [the] heroine feels so much more 'right' now.*"

Right away, at least to me, that made complete sense. There are some writers out there who can write an entire story with their characters being X and Y before filling in the names. I, personally, can't. A name means a lot to my characters. Sometimes, a story idea even *comes* from a name.

Take, for example, Willow. One of the main characters in my novel *Grey Areas*. To me, she has always been Willow. I'm not quite sure where the name came from at the time, but from the moment I started writing, she was Willow. From that name, an entire backstory came out that her parents had been hippies. Hence the plant name. For *The Bleeding Crowd*, the names are even more set. Dahlia comes from a mother who loves plant names (or perhaps it's just that *I* like plant names, looking back at it). The twins are Audrey and Zoe (A and Z for the two ends of the alphabet). All the men have biblical names (Benjamin, Jude, Abraham...)

But, ok, those all have plot reasons behind them. It would be a little odd to have all characters in X group have names that start with one letter and then randomly stray from that. In those cases, of course names matter. But what about just any old character? Does it really matter if a character just happens to be named Jill or Jane?

To quote Shakespeare, "That which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet" (*Romeo and Juliet* (II, ii)). But would the story

really have been the same if Romeo had been named Sam? Or Bill?

Perhaps. If you wrote the characters exactly the same, perhaps it wouldn't matter if the play were "Bill and Juliet" but then, the name Bill just brings up a different connotation there, doesn't it? The 1989 movie *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* just wouldn't have sounded the same if it had been "William and Theodore's Excellent Adventure" now would it?

To quote the great philosophers, the writers of *The Simpsons*:

Lisa: "A rose by any other name would still smell as sweet."

Bart: "Not if they were called 'Stink Blossoms'."

Perhaps a rose would still smell like a rose even if it were called something else. But what would someone's first reaction be if you were trying to give him/her a Stink Blossom for Valentine's Day? I doubt many people would want to even try smelling something that says it stinks in the name. And for those who did, you can't discount the idea of the mind playing tricks. Something along the lines of the placebo effect. You tell someone something's going to smell bad, and the less likely they are to accept that it smells good.

Personally, I think the same thing happens to a lot of writers. There's a picture in our heads associated

with names. Take Agnes for example. What's the first thing you picture? Unless you know someone else named Agnes, it's probably an older woman. Now Laquisha, or Vinnie. There are some names that are just associated with certain stereotypes – either because they are most common in a certain group, it's a name used often in media referring to one type of person, or because they have been used as a negative "catch-all" for a group of people (such as someone insultingly referring to a Hispanic man as 'Jose'). There's such a strong mental connection to some names that it doesn't only affect how a reader sees the character, but it starts morphing even us writers' ideas about our characters.

And, so were' back to Roxanne's point, "Changing a character's name changes everything." It's probably why it can take so long to find a perfect name for one character, and why you couldn't change another's name no matter how much a publisher or agent pushes you to. It's just the character's name. It's how you see them. It's who they grow to be.

And so, while a rose might still smell like a rose, it wouldn't be what we expected it to be. And that changes everything.

Historical Naming

Interesting question today: *"When writing historical fiction, do you have a hard time coming up with names? Is there a list of when particular personal names were first used? I have written some fiction that is historical and I'm worried the use of a name or names that were unknown in that period might put some people off because of the inaccuracy."*

I wrote before about how names can be astoundingly important to how both authors and readers respond to characters in stories. Therefore, it makes complete sense that having a "Neveah" or "McKenzie" wandering around Elizabethan England would be a problem.

Luckily writers have a few resources for looking for "historically accurate" names:

1. BehindtheName.com: One of my favorite sites for finding names in general, behindthename.com (and its sister site, surnames.behindthename.com) is a great resource for trying to find appropriate names for historical characters. With popularity lists reaching back to 1880 (when John and Mary topped the charts), you can very easily find names that would suit a story based in the Victorian era forward (it even lists just how popular the names were at the time: 8.15 percent of boys born were named John and 7.24 percent of girls named Mary, for example).

For earlier names, you have to do a little more digging, but by looking up specific names on the site you can find out their history, including first origin, famous bearers, and popularity charts. For example, for 'Mary' you'll find:

“In England [Mary] has been used since the 12th century, and it has been among the most common feminine names since the 16th century.”

For a name like 'Jessica', however, you'll find:

“This name was first used in this form by Shakespeare in his play, 'The Merchant of Venice' (1596), where it belongs to the daughter of Shylock ... It was not commonly used as a given name until the middle of the 20th century.”

So where you would be more than safe naming a character "Mary" in the middle of the War of the Roses, "Jessica" is probably better suited for contemporary fiction.

2. Historical Figures: If you are writing historical fiction you have most likely (hopefully) done some research into the time period. While doing that sort of reading, you have likely come across people who were important to the time period. For example, following the Elizabethan/Tudor example, you might see Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, Mary I, Edward VI, Katherine Parr, Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, William Shakespeare, Thomas Moore,

Walter Raleigh...and the list goes on and on and on. It is therefore reasonable to assume that you are "time period appropriate" using any of those given names in the time period.

If you are interested in genealogy/have done any family research, it is also possible to use your own family tree for inspiration. If you have an ancestor named "Samuel" who fought in the Civil War, you're likely safe making your 1860's character's name 'Samuel'.

3. Historical Records: Assuming you are writing about a time period that includes a written language/has some "primary source" documents surviving, you will likely be able to find names off censuses/tax rolls/etc. The more "modern" the time period, the simpler it will be to find these sorts of records (for example, the U.S. Census Bureau released the 1940 Census records in 2012 for interested parties), but it is possible to find things like the 1319 London Subsidy Roll online which will provide you with names such as Johannes ("John") and Thomas, which were both highly popular in London at the time.

(Note: Sources I have easily found online do tend to be highly euro-centric, but as long as you are writing about a "record-keeping" society you should be able to find something [i.e. it will be easier to find records from England or China than it will from nomadic groups]).

4. Figure out naming conventions: This is another one your previous research will aid in, but if you are looking for names on Behind the Name (or another similar site) this should help point you in the right direction. It's just about following trends. For example, naming oneself after royalty/the ruling class has always been popular, thus you will find more children born after the Norman Conquest with French-based names (from watching how many King Henrys and Charleses there are in both England and France early on, you can see the name bleed-over). Similarly, Puritans were big fans of "virtue" names (Charity, Mercy, Remembrance...) By picking a virtue name for your fictional character on the Mayflower, your name will fit in without "copying" a famous name.

(Note: It is also important to pay attention to naming conventions when it comes to things such as surnames and name order. Would your characters have patronymic names (Greta Hansdatter, James FitzJames, Phillip son of Coul) a geographic indicator (Joan of Arc, Leonardo da Vinci), their family name first (as it common in many Asian countries), or no second name at all? Those details help with the authenticity of your characters).

As with everything else in historical fiction, research is your friend. As long as you know the time period you're using, you shouldn't have a problem coming up with names.

Who are you, again?

Recently in the NaNoWriMo Forums, a writer asked for advice on, "how to appropriately introduce new characters and offer their names." The poster acknowledged that there seems to be two ways to introduce names to the reader. 1) Using the character's name, whether or not it has been used before; or 2) wait until the names come up in dialogue.

So which should be used? Honestly, a little of both.

Introducing characters is one of those moments where you really have to nail down whom your Point of View (POV) character is. With first person and third person limited being the most popular POVs these days, writers will most likely be writing with one character relating the story/a scene (either as "I" or "s/he") It is possible to change POVs between scenes, especially in third person, but each scene should follow one character (otherwise it becomes head jumping). Once you know who the POV character is in a scene, it becomes simpler to know when to share names.

1) If the POV character knows another character's name, use it. Since you are in the POV character's head, there is no reason to wait for someone to say another character's name if the POV

character knows it. Would you really call your friend "the tall man" or "the blond man" when you know his name is "Tim"? It is forcing in awkwardness where it needn't be.

(Note: The same goes for using nicknames. If the POV character calls someone "Tim" in his/her head, there is no reason to use "Timothy" in the narrative. Just be consistent [you shouldn't flip between Tim and Timothy in narrative if you start using one]).

2) If the POV character doesn't know another character's name, wait for it to come up. Hopefully, this won't be a long wait, but it would be a POV slip to say a name when your character would have no way of knowing it. Luckily, people tend to introduce themselves pretty early on when they aren't known to someone. Stalling some with "the blonde girl", "the young girl", or "the happy girl" shouldn't be a problem. As soon as the character is introduced or the POV character gets a name, you can switch to using the new character's name (e.g. another character in the scene calls "the blonde girl" Sally. It is fine to use Sally from that moment on because the POV character now has a name).

The biggest thing is you simply don't want to confuse your readers. The sooner you can introduce a name and use it consistently the better.

Finally, **if you are using an omniscient POV**, you should use the names for your characters as soon as they are introduced, unless there is a specific reason not to. As your narrator is omniscient, they know all of the character names to begin with. By withholding a name, you are saying there is something important about it. Suddenly using it without any sort of reveal comes off as odd/anticlimactic.

Plotting

From Premise to Plot

Ideas are the easy part of writing. They are the bright and shiny bits that bounce around your head before you have to get to the nitty-gritty part of actually writing. But what happens when all you have is an idea—not even a true plot that would let you start writing? That's where you have to take your idea from premise to plot.

Now, when it comes to creative writing, I'm all for rule breaking. That's the creative part, after all—not having to do everything to the letter, messing with grammar, all of those fun bits that make creative writing different from formal essays or business writing. But you need to know the rules before you

can break them. And so, for building a plot, that entails knowing the general elements to a plot.

For those who paid attention to that day in English class, you might have seen plots broken down into six (or so) sections:

1) Exposition (explaining your "normal"). Generally this section is one of the shortest parts of your story if you're following the common advice of "Get to the Action". This section of the story establishes what is "normal" in your story's world. This might be what is normal in everyday life, or it might be dragons flying around and wizards having duels. The point of this section is to show what your *character* considers normal life. Should nothing happen at this point, there would be no real plot. You would have a character study of how your protagonist goes about their day (generally not that exciting to read).

2) Inciting incident (changing "normal"). The inciting incident is some deviation from normal. This can be something simple (the character deciding they are unhappy with their life) or catastrophic (terrorists blowing up the character's city and killing the character's entire family). The inciting incident just needs to get the character moving on their story—and ideally it happens as early as possible so you don't lose the reader with boring "normal".

3) Rising Action. Rising Action makes up the bulk of the story. It is a series of events that eventually leads to the climax. As this tends to make the bulk of a plot I will touch more on this later.

4) The Climax. The climax is what the entire story has been building to. It's the final battle with the big bad, the underdog sports team winning the championship, or anything else where your protagonist finally reaches (or learns they will never reach) their main goal that has been driving the story. As the name would suggest, the climax is generally a large, blow out, (often) action-filled section. Whatever it ends up being, however, the main point is that it is definitive. Your protagonist wins or loses based on this moment (to whatever extent a win/loss is possible in your story).

5) Denouement (also called Falling Action, regaining "normal"). A denouement is the aftermath of the climax and a return to the "new" normal. Things may not have gone back to how they were at the start of the story (often times things are radically different) but the battle is over, the game is won, your protagonist has done whatever they can and are now going to settle into their new reality (whether that is their world changing, them changing, or everything actually going back to how it was).

6) Conclusion (settling into the new "normal"). Possibly part of the denouement, the conclusion is a (probably) short bit that shows the character living

once again in "normal". Sometimes this is an epilogue; sometimes it's not there at all (such as in open-ended endings).

Now, as I said, writers by no means should feel married to this exact lay out for their story—if you can think of something awesome that doesn't fit into this structure, do it. Most stories simply follow something of the kind.

Anyway, since the bulk of a story using this structure is spent in rising action, this tends to be the part that really turns a premise into a plot. For example, let's analyze the first *Harry Potter* book. Before writing even started, there was a premise (boy wizard goes to magic school). From there you have exposition (life in the normal "muggle" world) and inciting incident (boy learns he's a wizard/goes to school). There's the climax (battle with the big bad [Voldemort]), and denouement/conclusion with leaving school for the year. Taking all those bits out, you are left with the bulk of the story—rising action.

So what do you do when you have a premise (or premise and ending) and not much else? You figure out what your character *wants*. **Desires are what fuel action in real life, they're what fuel story characters.** If your characters are entirely content, why are they doing anything other than the boring stuff they were doing to start with? A character has to have a want—even if that want is just to get back to normal after being thrown out of

it in the inciting incident. The events shown in rising action can be external (people attacking the protagonist, a natural disaster) but the character needs to be in those positions because of their wants and desires. Perhaps they are attacked while on the road going from point A to point B, but why are they on that road in the first place? Likely because it is a step to reaching whatever desire/goal they have for themselves.

(Note: The climax is the resolution of the character's ultimate goal, but there should be smaller steps between the inciting incident and the climax. These are either steps that lead to that ultimate goal or smaller goals which generally make for subplots.)

And so, long story short, when you're caught trying to figure out how to plot out your book, stop focusing on the plot, and focus on your characters. Once you know *why* your characters are doing something, the easier it will be to have them realistically move the plot forward.

And if all else fails, throw in zombies. Zombies always get things moving.

“Accidental Plagiarism”

In the years I've been involved with writing and editing (and involved on the NaNoWriMo Forums) I've seen more than often posts that read like this:

"I'm watching a wonderful, wonderful BBC show called Being Human. The story they're telling is different from mine, but the bones of it ... it's like they read my mind and stuck it on the screen. It's so beautiful and amazing and I love it, but it's also heartbreaking because now I'm not sure if there's a point in telling my story. They already said it."

Or this:

"So all of November I was writing in speed racer mode, getting as many words down as possible. Come December first I had a week of major writer's block. Finally I went back and began writing. I started with rewriting my first chapter. I was so proud of my work that I had to show my friend. My friend read it, and immediately accused me of plagiarizing L.J. Smith's Vampire Diaries. She lent me her copy of the novel, and she was right. My first chapter looks as if I changed a few key details of L.J.'s first chapter."

While it is never fun to find out that our ideas aren't quite as unique as we might think they are, truthfully the anguish man writers feel when they find these similarities seems to come from the thought that ideas are what make novels great. This thought is also what leads many new writers to ask how to copyright an idea (which you can't do) just

so someone won't come across somewhere they've mentioned their story and all of a sudden swoop in and take it, as is summed up in this post:

"I'd be gut wrenched to wake up one day and see my plot silently taken and on top of the NY Times Best Seller list – for instance written and published off my synopsis – by another person without my ever knowing. As such I've never given a synopsis of it on any kind of forum before. It's just too risky to me."

I admit, I fully understand this fear. I was definitely someone who was scared of being scooped, so to speak, back when I first began writing. Scared that someone would tell my story first and all of a sudden I wouldn't be able to do anything with my baby since it was already out there. And that is the reason finding out something you've written seems dangerously close to something already published is devastating. It isn't so much the idea that people are going to sue you for plagiarism (which they couldn't do, since it is not possible "accidentally" plagiarize someone) it's that the idea that has been so precious to you, that you've been working with, tweaking, rewriting, and polishing isn't as unique and special as you thought it was.

In a recent interview I did, I was asked for the top five things I'd tell aspiring novelists. For Number Five, I said, "Trust People." The longer you write, spend time with writers, or deal with anything in publishing, the more you realize that nothing is

truly original. Something can be an interesting idea that hasn't been overdone, but if you can't find one part of your book that is like any one of the millions of books out there, you more than likely just haven't looked around enough. Furthermore, even if two people came up with the same idea right now, the actual writing would be nothing alike. It's why you don't get thirty of the same story in a creative writing class when everyone is given the same prompt.

It's no fun when you have someone accusing you of taking someone else's ideas. It's no fun when you find out that your amazing idea isn't quite as original as you thought it was. But ideas are only one very small part of what makes a good novel good. The writing, the characters, the actual plot...they are all more important than the premise.

So keep writing, trust others, and trust yourself. Your novel is going to be good or bad based on what you do. There are always going to be other people who come up with something that seems eerily similar to your book, but that doesn't mean yours is any less (or any more) worth reading. Just keep writing, and see what you end up with.

[X] Types of Plot

Not too long ago, I touched on the idea of "Accidental Plagiarism" that is, the experience of writing something that seems original and then finding out that there's something already out there that seems to have stolen the idea straight out of your head. It's more common than I'm sure any writer would like, but it's understandable. The more you read, the more you realize that there really seem to be no original ideas out there (that's part of the plot of my book *Between the Lines*, in fact).

Perhaps one of the best examples of this phenomenon I've recently seen comes from this post:

"So, I had this idea pop in my head. Where it came from, I have no idea. The very depths of my brain I guess. Anywho, I saw this scene, and a story fell into place. A world where Death is a man. He knows exactly who is going to die, when, where, why, etc. If he touches someone, they will die. One day, walking down an alley or street, a door bangs open in front of him and a girl tumbles out. She looks at him, and that's it, he falls in love. The problem, he can't touch her or she will die."

I have no doubt that the idea did pop organically into the poster's head, but what does that sound like? The forum she posted to helped with that:

"Family Guy actually does a joke version of that ["Death Lives" for those who care] Death is in love

with a pet shop owner, and actually ends up touching and killing her at the end."

"Sort of like Pushing Daisies. The guy there can bring people back to life with one touch, but then they die again the next time he touches them. He brings the girl he was in love with back to life, but can't touch her ever again or she'll die irreversibly. They have a really cute romance with kissing through plastic wrap and stuff since they can't touch skin to skin."

"Isn't that what Meet Joe Black was sort of about? I've heard the movie described kind of like that." / "Yup, and Meet Joe Black is based off an old black-and-white by the name of Death Takes a Holliday[sic]."

"Have you ever read On a Pale Horse? It's not exactly the same idea, but it is about the person of Death and he does fall in love."

So, not an uncommon idea. That hardly means the original poster shouldn't write her story, but obviously the idea that popped into her head also popped into a lot of other people's heads at one point or another. And, if you want to argue it, all stories that use the "can't touch the thing you love" plot tie even further back to the Ancient Greek "King Midas" myth. The newer stories might not have the same greed factor (turning things into gold) but it is still the idea of a life where touching something will destroy it.

These shared "out of nowhere" ideas are so common that Carl Jung came up with the idea of a Collective Unconscious, which has been described as, "a universal library of human knowledge." Simply, it's the idea that there are some ideas so innate in us that the mere fact of being human means it shouldn't be at all surprising when you have the same ideas as others.

Whether or not you subscribe to Jung's theory, people at least seem to agree that there are certain similarities you can break down all stories we tell into. The Reduced Shakespeare Company, for example, in their show, "The Complete Hollywood [Abridged]", says that all movies are one of three general plots:

1. *Boy Meets Girl*
2. *Coming of Age*
3. *The Jesus Story*

They then go on to take examples from the audience and break them down into one of the three.

Of course, as with any theory, there are plenty of suggestions about the "right" way to break down stories.

Foster-Harris, in *The Basic Patterns of Plot* also breaks stories into three categories:

1. *Type A—happy ending (the central character makes an "illogical" sacrifice for the sake of another)*
2. *Type B—unhappy ending (the central character does what seems logically "right" and thus fails to make the needed sacrifice)*
3. *Type C—the literary plot (the central character's decision doesn't matter as much as fate [such as often seen in Ancient Greek plays])*

Another suggestion is "The Seven Basic Plots"

1. *man vs. nature*
2. *man vs. man*
3. *man vs. the environment*
4. *man vs. technology*
5. *man vs. the supernatural*
6. *man vs. self*
7. *man vs. god*

Ronald Tobias, in *20 Master Plots*, has twenty:

1. *Quest*
2. *Adventure*
3. *Pursuit*
4. *Rescue*
5. *Escape*
6. *Revenge*
7. *Riddle*
8. *Rivalry*
9. *Underdog*
10. *Temptation*
11. *Metamorphosis*

12. *Transformation*
13. *Maturation*
14. *Love*
15. *Forbidden Love*
16. *Sacrifice*
17. *Discovery*
18. *Wretched Excess*
19. *Ascension*
20. *Descension*

And, because twenty sometimes isn't enough, Georges Polti gives us thirty-six in *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*:

1. *Supplication (Supplicant must beg something from a Power)*
2. *Deliverance*
3. *Crime Pursued by Vengeance*
4. *Vengeance taken for kindred upon kindred*
5. *Pursuit*
6. *Disaster*
7. *Falling Prey to Cruelty of Misfortune*
8. *Revolt*
9. *Daring Enterprise*
10. *Abduction*
11. *The Enigma (a temptation or a riddle)*
12. *Obtaining*
13. *Enmity of Kinsmen*
14. *Rivalry of Kinsmen*
15. *Murderous Adultery*
16. *Madness*
17. *Fatal Imprudence*
18. *Involuntary Crimes of Love*

19. *Slaying of an Unrecognized Kinsman*
20. *Self-Sacrificing for an Ideal*
21. *Self-Sacrifice for Kindred*
22. *All Sacrificed for Passion*
23. *Necessity of Sacrificing Loved One(s)*
24. *Rivalry of Superior and Inferior*
25. *Adultery*
26. *Crimes of Love*
27. *Discovery of the Dishonor of Loved One(s)*
28. *Obstacles to Love*
29. *An Enemy Loved*
30. *Ambition*
31. *Conflict with a God*
32. *Mistaken Jealousy*
33. *Erroneous Judgment*
34. *Remorse*
35. *Recovery of a Lost One*
36. *Loss of Loved One(s)*

You can argue about the exact types of plot, or even if it's possible to classify all plots under any amount of categories, but assuming you can, it really shouldn't be surprising that true originality seems to be all but impossible. Death falling in love? It could be 15 from the 20 (*Forbidden Love*) 28 of 36 (*Obstacles to Love*) 5 of 7 (*man vs. the supernatural*) or any of the 3 depending on how the author writes the story. And so, once again, it seems that struggling for originality seems futile. Does that mean we should stop trying and write the same story over and over again? Of course not. It just means it's that much more important to know that

it isn't the plot that will make the story special, it's how you tell the story.

Characterization

Making Your Characters Believable

When it comes to writing, I have always been a "character-driven" author. If you don't have a good plot, of course it's a problem, but I fully admit that it tends to be the characters that make me interested in writing a particular story rather than the plot (sometimes I'm not even entirely sure what the plot is going to be when I start out since I don't tend to care for outlines).

Leaving the characters in charge of powering the story, however, makes building believable characters all the more important. So how do you do that?

1. Work out a backstory. No character exists in a vacuum. Just like you didn't magically appear one day fully grown (I'm assuming...) your character likely has some past that affects the person they are today. While you should certainly avoid info dumping (overwhelming your reader with a bunch of backstory that they may or may not need to know all or once) you, as the author, need to know what

makes your character tick. Have they had a great sense of humor since they were a child? Did they learn it from a friend? Is it a reaction to having a very serious family? The answer may not matter to anyone else, but it will help you shape the little things about your character which turn them from 'Character A' to a real person.

2. Use Character Questionnaires sparingly.

All right, this comes down to if you find them helpful or not, but Character Questionnaires have only been passingly helpful for me in the past. They are great for getting the basics down, like what your character looks like or if they have siblings, but is thinking about what my character's favorite ice cream flavor is really going to help make them real? If questionnaires work for you, go for it. You just might be better served working outside a form (I personally like writing in paragraphs when it comes to the basics) or using other character-building techniques. Like:

3. Take your characters out of your story.

Dialogue has always been my strength, so I might be biased here, but one of the best ways I have found to develop a flat character is to take them out of the actual story, and throw them into a strange situation. How would Character A take it if she were suddenly stuck in an elevator with Character B? How would Character B act if he were out couch shopping with his mother? Without having to worry about where the story is going, the characters are free to talk to one another and generally interact

with the world, which can give you some great insight into everything from their speech patterns to past relationships.

4. Let your character lead. This one doesn't happen to everyone, but sometimes well-developed characters get a little headstrong. If you find yourself writing and all of a sudden a character decides that they actually don't like a character you meant to make their best friend/significant other, let them make the change. It's a good sign your character is developed enough to react to a situation as their own person—forcing them back to what you originally were planning will often suddenly shatter the little things that make them a "real", believable person.

Character Flaws

With the term "Mary Sue" becoming common amongst writers, one question I get asked more and more is how to give characters flaws. After all, one of the major reasons Mary Sues are so annoying are that they're perfect, and perfect characters are boring at best, unbearable at worst.

The problem with thinking of weaknesses as something you have to throw in to balance out strengths, however, is that it is entirely missing the point. **Giving a character weaknesses isn't**

about balancing some cosmic Mary Sue scale (Good singer +3 Sue, Clumsy -1) **it's about making your character seem *real*.**

And so, if your character seems annoyingly perfect, throwing in a few "weaknesses" isn't going to help all that much. A saintly character who is sweet, and smart, and entirely angelic is not going to become any more interesting because sometimes she's absentminded or naive.

When trying to flesh out characters, don't worry about the strengths and weaknesses lists, worry about building a believable character. While a lack of weaknesses is a warning sign for Mary Sues, the bigger problem is they simply aren't believable. They're perfect and special and the world around them changes to accommodate them because they are so perfect and special. Any amount of random weaknesses isn't going to change that.

So, how do you build a non-Sue?

1. Separate yourself from your character.

Every author puts a little bit of themselves into their characters. One character might like the music you like. Another might have your sarcasm. That isn't a problem. What you don't want to do is make a character your wish fulfillment. A character that is you as you wish you could be isn't going to be realistic. Even a character you just really, *really* care about might not be. Caring about your characters is fine, just don't let your love for them

cloud your judgment when it comes to building their personalities.

2. Think of personality as more than just a pro/con list. As stated above, it isn't possible to balance out a Mary Sue by countering their +3 awesomeness with their -2 absentmindedness and -1 clumsiness. Instead of coming up with a list of all that is good about your character and then trying to think of an equal number of weaknesses, come up with *traits*. People are a balance of good and bad traits in real life, but many times what is positive and what is negative come from the same trait. Being outgoing, for example, is generally a good thing. It can become negative, however, if the character doesn't know when to keep quiet or can't keep secrets simply because they love to talk to people. Again, being a straight-A student would likely go on the "strength" side of the list, but what comes with that as far as weaknesses go? Perhaps they're stressed, feeling they need to be perfect. Maybe they're overly competitive or think school is the only thing that's important. Consider each trait and what it means for your character's personality, not just if it goes in the strengths or weaknesses category.

3. Change your character based on your world, don't change your world for your character. Everyone has a past. Whether you drop in when your character is five, fifteen, or fifty, it doesn't matter. They have things from the past that have shaped who they are. While the reader doesn't

necessarily need to know everyone's backstory, it's important for the author to, and to think about how growing up as the character did affected them. Someone who grows up dirt poor in rural New Mexico is going to be a different person than someone who grew up being groomed for the galactic senate. Don't change the world you have built to suit your character (the real world doesn't change to suit us), figure out how your character fits into the world you have built.

"Plot Device" Disorders

As far as I can tell, mental problems have always been something writers have liked to use in their stories, and it makes sense. "Normal" is not what tends to make for a good story. A perfectly happy character who wakes up, goes to school/work every day, watches some TV, and then goes to bed is pretty boring. Stories are based around conflicts, desires, and the way characters overcome some sort of adversity. As mental disorders present their own challenges, they can make for very interesting characters/stories. This, at its heart, is not a bad thing. When disorders become plot devices, however, it's another story

Now, there are many, many mental disorders in the world. The recently released DSM-V (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth

edition) contains seventeen categories for various disorders—ranging from Anxiety Disorders to Sexual Dysfunction—with several different specific disorders inside each. While I'm sure it is possible to find stories using a full range, certain disorders are much more "en vogue" for use in fiction. For example, it is simple to list famous characters who are presented with disorders such as antisocial personality disorder/psychopathy (Hannibal Lecter from *Silence of the Lambs*, Dexter Morgan from *Dexter*); DID (Norman Bates from *Pyscho*, Susannah Dean from *The Dark Tower*, the narrator from *Fight Club*); and OCD (Adrian Monk from *Monk*, Melvin Udall in *As Good as it Gets*) it's a bit less common to see characters with pica, adjustment disorder, or central sleep apnea (all listed in DSM-V). While it might simply be more "fun" to write about certain disorders over others, it leads to certain issues for writing when a disorder becomes trendy.

What brought me to this topic was finding this post in a writing forum today:

"Could anybody just tell me more about it [dissociative identity disorder] in general? Because I know very little about it."

While the question is generally pretty innocuous (they were provided with a link to WebMD with the basics) what worries me the most about seeing questions like this on writing sites is the sinking feeling that the author saw something that has a

character with DID and decided "Hey, that's a neat idea. I bet that would be a fun story," and that was the end of that. Hopefully the asker of the question is planning on looking further into the disorder (and, if s/he decides to proceed, does a fair deal of research) but with different disorders so prevalent in fiction, it becomes so, so easy for writers to decide X disorder would be an awesome plot device and jump into using the movie/book/TV show's portrayal as the basis for their entire character.

Why is that such a problem? Because **often works of fiction still get disorders wrong on a very basic level**. By taking that version of the disorder at face value to throw in your story you are simply going to perpetuate all those issues. A bump on the head causing, and fixing, amnesia? Not going to happen. Not all psychopaths are going to be serial killers (or are even likely to be). PTSD doesn't mean you're going to be acting out flashbacks in real life. From a storytelling standpoint, it makes sense why we see these things. It makes for easier or more hair-raising scenes, but that doesn't make it anymore correct. And with the amount of misinformation surrounding mental disorders, it can be damaging to perpetuate these "facts".

So, how do you keep from falling into these "plot device" traps?

1. Know movies/TV/novels often get it wrong. Watching a movie with a character with X disorder does not mean you suddenly are set to

write about the same disorder. Some media does do a very good job of representing certain disorders (the beginning of *Silver Linings Playbook* is actually very well done in displaying a manic episode in bipolar, for example) but far too often, disorders (especially popular disorders) are incorrect. Look to real-life accounts rather than fiction for what living with a disorder is actually like.

2. Figure out what the mental disorder is adding to your story. Perhaps one of the most amusing questions I find on certain Mary Sue Tests is:

Does your character have any of the following psychological disorders or conditions for the following reasons?

1) *Antisocial Personality Disorder –to explain your character's Jerk Loner personality?*

2) *Split personality/multiple personalities – so your character can do "bad" stuff, yet still have a claim to innocence?*

If your entire reason for using a mental disorder is for an excuse or because you intend to use it as a plot device, rethink and do more research. Because...

3. Think about how the disorder would affect your character outside the plot. People with mental disorders are not entirely defined by their disorder, but mental disorders do affect many

things in everyday life when you are dealing with one. Pulling out a mental disorder just when convenient for an excuse or your plot will 99.99 percent of the time come off as incorrect and/or insulting. "Having X" is as much of a personality trait as "she doesn't like apples" or "he's hot headed". Pulling a disorder out only when convenient or just for the plot is as jarring as having a character gain or lose any other trait they have.

4. Research, research, research. Really, I can't stress this enough. You don't always have to "write what you know" but you should only write that which you are willing to learn about. At least if you don't want to seem like you're clueless or to stick your foot in your mouth. There are great resources for first-hand accounts, you can ask in a forum (many people are actually rather open with sharing their experiences if you ask, I find), or you could talk to mental health professionals. There are many great depictions of mental disorders in well-rounded characters out there, you just have to be willing to put in the legwork to get there.

Just a Pretty Face

As I've said before, I am a dialogue person. For whatever reason, dialogue is more fun (and plainly easier) for me to write than pretty much anything else. Of course, for novels, narrative, description,

and all of that fun stuff is just as important, so my biggest challenge has always been slowing down enough to be sure to write down just *how* these things I'm seeing in my head actually look (since for some reason, readers aren't yet able to see exactly what I'm seeing when I write without me actually writing descriptions... odd that).

Of course, when trying to write description, it's important to have a clear picture of characters and places in your mind. There are only so many times you can give a character blond/brown/red hair and blue/brown/green eyes before even your own characters begin to lose shape in your head.

So while some characters might spring to mind clearly, what do you do when you come up to a roadblock as to what a character looks like other than tall/short/average with X hair and X eyes?

I'm sure there are a number of solutions people have come up with, but mine, personally, is simple: **Look at people.** While the first things you might use to describe someone in real life might be the same things you already had for a character (height, weight, coloring) studying a face, a real face, will give you a better picture in your head as to what actually makes a person rather than a person-shaped blob (am I the only one with blobby characters to start with? maybe?)

As for finding faces for inspiration, there are three different ways to generally go about it:

1. Watch people around you. Assuming you don't live in some remote cabin/underground/in the Australian outback, most people come into regular contact with other humans on a daily basis. By watching the people you interact with, it's possible to start compiling features that shape your character. The man at the bakery's hair, the girl on the Metro's chin, looking at what makes a person unique will help you move past X hair and X eyes.

Of course, the downside to this can be the creepy factor. Staring at someone next to you at the bank will no doubt make you look odd/suspicious. "I'm a writer" only works so many times as an excuse.

2. Look at celebrities. Since staring at people on the street can get you weird looks, a lot of my writer friends prefer this route. After all, you're *supposed* to stare at TV and movie stars for long chunks of time. Some writers even prefer to "cast" their novel as they go along (Jane would be played by Jennifer Lawrence, Sam by Ryan Reynolds, etc. etc.) By picturing the "movie" version of your novel, it makes it very simple to get more about your characters than just hair and eye color. While I do use this tactic from time to time (one of the characters in my WIP would totally be Darren Criss in my head...) I personally find I still can't use this solution that often. While you have more of a chance to study celebrities than people in your everyday life, you also have more of a chance to get used to their personality (or at least the personality

you see on camera). While you might not have meant it to be, basing a character off how Natalie Portman looks in *Black Swan* might end up making you a character slightly more psychotic than you originally intended—simply because you start writing *that* character, not your own.

3. Use Google Image Search to look up headshots. And so we get to my personal favorite solution when it comes to finding faces for characters—using Google Images to look up pictures of random people. While you might still have a little bit of the creep factor (staring at random people online...? Okay...?) it isn't quite as bad as staring at people on the street. And while you can spend a long time studying the picture, you don't also know who the person is to have that coloring your perception (added bonus, you can also find much more "average" people in these kinds of headshots than you can in Hollywood. Not everyone wants the "nerd" in their story to look like Rachel Weisz in glasses). To use this method, you just go to images.google.com, type in what you're looking for ("headshot girl red hair", "headshot old man") and you will come up with pages of faces to look at without looking like a creep to anyone but the people at Google recording your searches (but if you're a writer, they probably already think you're a druggy serial killer based on those searches anyway, so who really cares?)

Dialogue

You Don't Say

Writers, as a whole, tend to find their strength either in dialogue or in narrative. I have no bones about saying I'm the former. Dialogue just flows for me where narrative can sound a little clunky. For others, though, writing dialogue is the hardest part. For example, on the NaNoWriMo forums, people have posted:

"I always have a hard time writing dialogue. If someone could help me, it would be appreciated."

"I think good dialogue is very hard to write. So I've resigned myself to the fact that it will require extra effort when it's time to rewrite and revise... "

"I'm about 1,000 words into my NaNo and for some reason I'm stuck on dialogue. When I wrote out the beginning of this conversation it sounded fine in my head, however, on paper/screen, it looks horrendous."

Struggling with narrative and struggling with dialogue are both bad things (they make for stilted/unnatural reading) but for now, some tips for writing better dialogue.

1. Listen. Just like people develop an ear for notes when they're musicians (my French Horn-playing brother can pick out a flat note from a mile away) writers tend to develop an ear for language. Some people are better at it naturally than others, but if someone writes well, somehow or another they've figured out what sounds right. Developing that ear is part of what makes writing get better over time (practice makes perfect after all) and while reading good writing can definitely help with that, when working on writing better dialogue, simply sitting down and listening can be one of your greatest tools.

Having worked in acquisitions, I have seen people put down all sorts of credits on their query letters (past publications, degrees, having worked as a journalist/technical writer, etc.) and after reading your first thousand queries, you learn quickly which credits mean something. The reason spending twenty years as a technical writer for a company doesn't mean much on a query letter is that creative writing is very different from formal writing. Being a technical writer means that (hopefully) you have good spelling and grammar, but it doesn't say you can write a good novel. People talk in fragments. They use poor grammar. They use slang. Where you'd never (again hopefully) find a piece of business writing that says, "Me and my guys..." You may very well find a character in a novel saying it, and making it work.

The more you listen to those speaking around you, the more you will pick up natural speech patterns and therefore be able to write dialogue naturally.

2. Don't be too formal. As I said up above, people don't talk in completely proper English. One of the most common problems I see in novels I'm editing with stilted dialogue is that, for some reason, the author has gotten rid of most of their contractions. Perhaps it comes from years of teachers trying to get us not to use contractions in formal essays (I know my teachers did). Taking contractions out of your dialogue makes your character sound awkward. It's actually, I've found, one of the best ways to make your character sound like a non-native speaker. Don't overdo "not proper" language (be careful not to leave the reader scratching their heads about what you mean, at least) but embrace short, choppy wording to sound less awkward.

2b. Don't use stereotypes/slang you don't know. Side note to number 2, people use slang/improper grammar, but they aren't stereotypes. Don't try to force in slang you aren't familiar with to try to make a [enter ethnicity/nationality/age here] character sound "natural" A little might be ok, but making a character say "wicked" or "dawg" every other sentence will sound just as unnatural as overly proper dialogue (and has the added bonus of often coming off rather insulting).

3. Don't be long-winded. Unless your character is supposed to be a blowhard (or a Bond villain), keep dialogue short and to the point. Contractions, nicknames, abbreviations, people tend take just about any short cut they can use to cut down on the length of what they're saying. Long monologues with a lot of unnecessary words come off as unnatural.

4. Use punctuation properly. One of the biggest problems with written dialogue is that you only have the words, not the intonation/cadence you have in actual speech. "Why did you do that" can be said a million different ways, but how it's read is dependent on your reader. Use commas properly to show small pauses, periods to show full stops, and, if you need to, use italics to show emphasis ("Why did you do *that*?") Don't worry if using a period every once in a while ends up with a sentence fragment (re: people don't speak in proper English). If something is an afterthought, a period might best suit the sentence. For example:

"I really want a dog or a cat."

reads differently than:

"I really want a dog, or a cat."

reads differently than:

"I really want a dog. Or a cat."

it might be preferable to have an exchange along the lines of:

"You don't know what you're talking about," Bill said.

"You're an idiot." Sam crossed his arms.

"Who's the one who tried sailing a bottle to China?"

"I was five. Let it go."

And so on and so forth. Without the tags, more focus is placed on the dialogue, and it, as a whole, reads more quickly. So, all in all, a good thing.

Why I don't suggest not using tags as a suggestion in my previous "said" article, however, is it's very, very easy to abuse it. While it's fine to have some untagged dialogue, what you definitely want to avoid is floating dialogue. That is, untagged dialogue that leaves the reader wondering who the heck is talking.

As I have said before, writers tend to have a bias when it comes to dialogue vs. narrative. Some find dialogue difficult to write, some hate narrative; it really just comes down to what each writer's strengths are. For those who tend towards dialogue, floating dialogue is a common problem I see with new writers.

Now, I can only speak from personal experience, but the reason I tend to write so much dialogue is that, where narrative can seem wordy and forced, the call and response nature of dialogue keeps it

coming so quickly that sometimes I have trouble keeping up with where I want the conversation to go. Since I hear the characters talking in my head, it's easy enough to just write what they're saying and forget about writing what they're doing in my head. It's their words that are important after all, right?

Well, sort of. While, in those situations, you are probably doing the bulk of your storytelling in the dialogue, the reader sadly isn't seeing what you're seeing your characters doing while reading. And so, while you are writing a powerful, emotional scene between your main characters—filled with brilliant, brilliant dialogue—your reader is being left with something akin to the written version of hearing a movie in the next room without being able to see who's talking or what they're doing.

While it's a fine balance—you never want to talk down to your readers/hit them over the head with something they probably already understand—you don't want to make it too difficult for them understand what's happening. If you're spending every other page flipping around trying to understand who's talking, you're more than likely not going to get invested in the story. When you aren't invested in the story *and* it's taking a lot of effort just to understand the basics, it's pretty likely you aren't going to enjoy the book/will be putting it down not too far in.

And so, if you are planning on using untagged dialogue, watch out for floating dialogue by:

1. Only use untagged dialogue when there are two people in the conversation. When it comes to floating dialogue, this is probably the biggest problem I've found in my editing work. While it's fine to switch off between two people in an argument without tags, you can't do that where there are multiple people sitting around. For example:

"Hi," Sam said.

"Hey," Bill said.

"How are you?" Karen asked.

"I'm fine."

"Awesome. Do you want to go to the park?"

"I don't know, it looks like rain."

"No, I saw the weather report. Just cloudy."

Ok, hands up. Who can tell who's saying what at the end of the conversation? Since Karen asks Sam a question (How are you?) the "I'm fine" is probably Sam again, but then, is it Karen saying "Awesome"? Or is it Bill? And who says it looks like rain? Bill? Sam? Karen? Depending on who said "Awesome" it could be any of them.

In contrast with just two people:

"Hi," Sam said.

"Hey," Bill said. "How are you?"

"I'm fine."

"Awesome. Do you want to go to the park?"

"I don't know, it looks like rain."

"No, I saw the weather report. Just cloudy."

Perhaps still a little float-y, but at least you can more than likely tell it's Sam-Bill-Sam-Bill-Sam-Bill.

2. Don't use untagged dialogue when the characters are *doing something*. As stated in my "don't be afraid of 'said'" article, you can get around using 'said' over and over again by making the tags action. For example:

"How are you?" Bill shuffled his papers away.

Sam took a seat across the desk from him. "I'm fine."

In this case, the dialogue tags are not only telling the reader who's speaking, but acting as stage directions in a way. Going back to the movie example, with no tags and multiple people, you're in the other room listening to a bunch of talk from who knows how many people. With no tags and two people, you at least can tell who's speaking, but that's all you have, a bunch of lines with no action. If all your characters are doing is standing around having a conversation, you don't need any tags. If they're moving around, though, you need to show it—and while it's happening. Putting on an action tag not only shows the reader what's happening (what the "actor" is doing on-screen) but it also keeps the reader up to date. One thing I perhaps

find the most annoying of all floating dialogue problems is something along these lines:

"How are you?" Bill asked.

"Fine," Sam said.

"That's cool, have you seen my new pet?"

"No, I haven't."

"Well, here it is!"

While they had been talking, Bill had walked around the corner and pulled out a giant dog that then attacked Sam.

a) Action slows down when the actual exciting part is buried under a mountain of "this is what you missed"

b) For the past five lines I've been picturing Bill and Sam standing there talking, now I have to reattach it to the incorrect visual I have in my head, which means I have to backtrack in my mind rather than staying with the action.

Both of these problems can be solved by simply tagging the lines with action:

"How are you?" Bill asked.

"Fine," Sam said.

"That's cool." Bill slowly moved towards one corner of the room. "Have you seen my new pet?"

"No, I haven't."

"Well, here it is!"

Bill pulled out...

3. Don't put tags in after a new person has already entered the conversation. In the same vein of not making the reader play catch up to the action, if a third person enters into a two-person, untagged conversation, make sure the reader knows it immediately.

"Hey," Bill said.

"Hey, how are you?" Sam asked.

"Not bad."

"Awesome, do you want to go to the park?"

"I don't know. It looks like rain."

"Oh, hey Karen, how are you?"

Wait, what? When did Karen get there? Was she actually speaking when I thought it was Bill? When possible—if you don't have a legitimate reason for keeping the reader off balance—try not to make the reader confused enough to stop and reread previous lines.

4. Even in a two-person conversation, don't only use tags at the very beginning of the conversation. Ok, so there are two people standing there talking to each other. Nothing else is happening, it's just going to be a quick back and forth. Sounds like the perfect place not to use tags. You mark the first speaker as Bill, the second as Sam, and then go at it. If it's a very short conversation, that's absolutely fine. If it's going to go for pages back and forth, still make sure you throw some more tags in their down the line, even if it's just to make sure someone doesn't miss a line

somewhere and get really confused when it seems like Sam's saying what Bill would. A good rule of thumb is to have names attached to dialogue at least three times a page, just to make it clear which speaker is which. Of course, that's just a vague outline. If it seems likely the reader is still going to get confused even with three tags, make sure you put more in. If you think it's crystal clear, you might be able to go for longer between tags (though checking in with a beta reader/editor who can tell you if they're lost will help you know whether or not it really is that apparent later on).

5. Remember the reader isn't inside your head. And, as always, this is the big one. While it might be obvious in your head that Bill is saying something and then Sam is, you just can't expect the reader to know that. While it's *so obvious* to you that Bill's moving across the room while speaking, until you've written it down, the reader just can't know that. Don't over explain things (if it isn't important that the main character just got their hair done and put on some new sneakers they bought last week, you don't need to say it) but make sure you have all of the *necessary* information to keep them from being confused a couple of paragraphs down.

Narrative

Writing Shakespeare

As prolific as Shakespeare has proven to be with his plays, most people at least have a passing familiarity with a few of his plays. With Baz Luhrmann and Kenneth Branagh out there, it's even likely many have seen at least one of Shakespeare's plays performed, more or less, with its original dialogue—even if some have guns in them.

While Shakespeare has been adapted and re-adapted in just about every setting possible at this point, the language is still a sticking point for many readers. This exposure to what sometimes is mistakenly referred to as "Old English" (Shakespeare wrote in "Early Modern English" much more understandable than true Old English), many times seems to give writers who wish to set a story in Tudor England the feeling that they need to break out the prithees and thous (and perhaps try to figure out how the heck to write in iambic pentameter) if they are going to be "accurate".

The first time I received a question about how to properly do X-time period language in writing, I admit I was a bit confused. Having grown up on a steady diet of historical fiction as a child, I'd never considered having to make someone "sound" 16th century in a novel by going so far as to write in Early Modern English. It makes sense to some extent (you wouldn't have someone in 1620's

Massachusetts saying "cool" or "what's up") but there is certainly a difference between refraining from using modern slang and trying to get your Ph.D. in Renaissance Literature so you're able to properly use Elizabethan phrasing.

Have your Ph.D. and want to write in historically accurate language? Awesome, that sort of rocks. Just find the time period fascinating and want to write a story about it after doing non-Ph.D.-level linguistics research? Don't drive yourself crazy.

You see, the main reason Early Modern English finds itself questioned so much when it comes to this set up is that it is a version of English that is obviously different, but still possible to understand. Writing in it is not outside the realm of possibility, so some authors feel like a fraud not even trying.

But then, if you're writing a book set in ancient Rome, do you have to write it in Latin? If your characters are from Japan, do you have to write in Japanese? Do you have to come up with an entirely new language for your aliens who would obviously not speak English on their home planet?

Of course not.

Creative fiction comes built in with a very handy tool for writers—suspension of disbelief. To a certain extent, the reader is willing to believe what you (the author) say is true simply because you say so. There are dragons in your world? Sure, let's read

about them. There's no such thing as a smart phone? Sure, why not. You have to be careful to stay within the set rules of your universe and not strain/break that suspension of disbelief, but overall, it's a handy tool.

Language works the same way. Would someone born and raised in Japan likely speak English everywhere they go? No. Does that mean you can't write that story until you become fluent in Japanese? Again, no. As we have been trained to do since before most of us would be able to even really think about it, suspension of disbelief allows the reader to assume that the novel is a modern-English translation of whatever your characters would likely be speaking. You can easily break this disbelief by throwing in too-modern language in historical pieces, but you by no means have to learn some different dialect just because you are writing historical fiction. And that really is for a few reasons.

1. Suspension of disbelief covers you. As I said above, people aren't going to condemn your WWII story for not being written in Polish when that's your setting. They aren't going to condemn you for not writing in Early-Modern English for a Tudor period piece. Just keep the modern slang out of it, and it is assumed your work is a "translation".

2. You're more than likely going to get something wrong and be more distracting. Unless you are a linguistics protégé/actually did get

your Ph.D. and are now fluent in the vocabulary and syntax of whatever time period you're setting your story in, trying to make your characters sound Shakespearean is just going to make the dialogue stilted and annoying to people who might be more familiar in the usage (that's not how you use thou!) You will end up with better writing, writing as you are comfortable.

3. It makes it easier for your audience to read. As well remembered as Shakespeare is, there are still plenty of people who just "don't get it" and thus don't especially like struggling through the Elizabethan language while attempting to follow along. Perhaps you know all the nuances, perhaps you don't, you still have cut your possible readership down to people who understand Early-Modern English/don't mind muddling through. Generally your sales will thank you not to do so.

And so, don't worry too much about what your characters would actually speak when you're writing, even when writing historical fiction. Worry about not throwing someone out of the time period altogether with modern slang. As long as you are careful about that, you're in good shape.

(Note: When it comes to using a word that you feel might sound too "modern" I highly suggest looking at etymonline.com. An online etymological source, it has the historical usage of most words in its database. So can you use the word "crazy" to describe the man yelling about the world ending

outside the Globe Theatre? Etymonline says, if it's after 1570, yes if you mean "diseased, sickly" or, after 1610, to mean "of unsound mind, or behaving as so").

Head Jumping

Pretty much anyone who's read a book has probably seen narrative written in first and third person. Some people may have even seen a couple in second. Everyone has their favorite to write in, and generally read, but I've always been rather partial towards third person. (Specifically third person limited).

Now, before I continue, First/Second/Third Person Points of View (POV) are something most people have heard about, but as a quick refresher:

In a first-person POV the story is relayed by a narrator, who is also a character within the story, so that the narrator reveals the plot by referring to this viewpoint character as "I" (or, when plural, "we"). For example: "I walked into the club..."

In second person, the narrator refers to one of the characters as "you", therefore making the audience member feel as if he or she is a character within the story. ("You see the man walking toward you.") Not

very popular, it's mostly seen in "Choose your own adventure" books.

Third person has two subsets—limited and omniscient. In both, every character is referred to as "he", "she", "it", or "they". In limited, the narrator is a character in the story, much like first person) only referred to as "s/he" rather than "I". In omniscient, the narrator is a being outside the narrative relating all the character's actions (as though they are watching the action unfold on stage/below them).

Everyone feeling refreshed? Ok, on we go.

Each POV has their own pros and cons, but first person and third person-limited are by far the most popular in modern literature.

Interestingly, after reading so many first novels working as an editor, I find that first time novelists seem drawn to first person (not as a rule, but as a general observation). I'm not quite sure why that is (perhaps the connection writers tend to feel towards first characters?) but it does offer some protection from a common third person limited problem. Head jumping.

If you're writing in third person, stop and take a look at your writing. Are you showing the world as how your main character would see it? Then you're in third person limited. Now, do you still say how every character is feeling when it comes up? That's

okay, but only if you stay in one character's POV. Otherwise, it's head jumping. And head jumping can be both annoying and confusing.

Without the confines of telling a story in first person—where you're *forced* to stay in one character's head—many people find themselves telling the reader what each character is feeling when it suits. We start in Character A's head, showing the world as they experience it, and say what they're feeling. For example:

A felt her stomach flutter.

As the POV character, A can know how she's feeling. And it's good to say. You're showing how she's feeling, not telling the reader how she's feeling. Top marks for you. A *can't* however know how character B is feeling. For example:

*A felt her stomach flutter.
B looked back, knowing she was in love.*

I know, not a great example there, but still, 1) B can't know that unless they're a character with some sort of omniscient powers and, 2) You're in A's point of view, A can't know what B knows. It is a POV slip.

It may not seem like the biggest deal for some people, but going back and forth in third person limited shifts the entire world. As I said before, in both first person and third person limited you are

showing the world through a character—both their point of view, and how they experience their world. A might be a pessimist, for example, while B is an optimist. In B's POV, therefore, the reader is going to be experiencing the scene that is happening differently. Not markedly, perhaps, but through B's eyes, not A's. By jumping back and forth, you shift the entire view the reader is getting, which can offer a strange sense of vertigo.

Luckily there are some things you can do to stay in one POV in third person.

1. Decide who's experiencing the event. Think about whose eyes you're seeing the story through (or the scene through). That is the person who is going to be telling everyone their personal experiences. Don't slide into someone else's just because you want their reaction.

-And more importantly-

2. Think about what the POV character could see to give other characters' reactions. Perhaps the POV character can't know the other character's having their stomach flutter, but they can see them place a hand on their stomach, or swallow, or (if nothing else) you can say it *seems* the other character is experiencing something (A placed a hand on her stomach, looking as if it fluttered uncomfortably). The last might not be the best way to go about it, but it's better than head jumping.

It can be a little harder to funnel your writing through one character's POV, but lazy writing doesn't make for good writing, so just take a little longer and think about what the POV character could know. It will also help with the age-old showing vs. telling problem. You will be *forced* to show actions rather than just saying what characters feel.

Section Two: Editing

Once you have a rough draft, the next stage of work comes in—getting your manuscript polished into something you're ready for others to read. Fixing major plot holes or just awkward wording, here's to making manuscripts the best that they can be.

Editing 101

As I head into edits for *The Porcelain Child* (Book 2 of the *Broken Line* series), I have been asked for some editing tips for when you're first taking a stab at going through the several thousand words of a rough draft.

Of course, there are no set rules anyone must follow when it comes to editing your own work. Much like writing, it's about developing a style that works for you. To help take the first steps, however, I have included the "standard" advice I have heard when it comes to editing and my own thoughts on each.

1. Take a break after you have written it. Whether it's a day or Stephen King's suggested six weeks, this is the first piece of advice most writers hear when it comes to editing. In my own opinion, this isn't bad advice, if you start right into editing the moment you write "the end" you will likely still be in writing mode and miss a lot of

problems you might otherwise pick up. Of course, if there are still large portions of the story you know you will have to rewrite, taking yourself out of this mindset might be detrimental.

Verdict: If you are ready for straight editing, take a break. Possibly even work on another project that will take your mind off things. If you need large swaths of rewrites/changes, go ahead and start right away. (Caveat—if you are writing a series and have a publisher waiting for books, it's probably best to go right into edits so you can send that off before they yell at you...)

2. Just do a read through. After you have taken a break, the most common advice I've heard is to read through the manuscript without making any changes. While this is good if you need to put yourself in another mindset (if you need "editor" brain, rather than "writer" brain) I have never personally followed this advice. I never make big changes on the first read through (unless I was already rewriting a section, as mentioned in Step 1) but reworking wording here and there to fix problems will not make or break how you edit.

Verdict: It is a good idea not to start making sweeping changes on your first go through (otherwise you might find yourself causing more problems than you fix) but, unless you need "editor" brain to work, you can feel free to make changes as you go along on your first read through.

3. Don't sweat the small stuff. Yes, grammar is important, but it is not the most important thing at the beginning stages of editing. If you realize after your first read through that a character simply isn't working or there's a plot hole that needs to be taken care of, deal with that before you work on the exact wording for one sentence and worry if you should have subjunctive tense or not in another. If you end up reworking entire scenes, you'll likely find new typos popping up anyway. Don't worry about those until the big pieces have all fallen into place.

Verdict: Definitely good advice for an early go-through. There's a reason copy edits always come after line and content edits when working with a publisher. Grammar and spelling are important, but not until everything else is fixed.

Note, "big pieces" generally include:

- Plot holes
- Characterization problems
- Info dumps rather than interwoven backstory
- Inconsistent tone
- Unnecessary/repetitive scenes
- Missing scenes

Along with anything that will perhaps require substantial rewrites and/or added/deleted text.

4. Read it Out Loud. Once you've gotten the big things ironed out, one of the best ways to hear if a

sentence is off is to read it out loud. I find this especially helps people who have trouble with dialogue. Dialogue is about capturing how people speak, so if seems stiff to say aloud, it's probably too stiff for the page.

Verdict: If you are still developing your voice as a writer, or have a specific problem with clunky sentences/dialogue, reading aloud is a great way of fixing that. If you are more seasoned/can "hear" how it sounds in your head, it isn't as necessary, though it can still be helpful.

5. Read it Backwards. Having moved on from the large problems, reading backwards is what I have often heard suggested for catching typos. Not caught up in the story, you are more likely to see that that "the" was supposed to be "they". Since half of grammar to me is being able to pause over what doesn't sound correct in a sentence, personally, I don't find this as helpful a step as others, but the idea holds: Find some way to take yourself away from the story and focus on the words themselves.

*Verdict: While the principle holds true, this might be more helpful in finding spelling mistakes than grammar if you "write by ear" like I do. (I prefer **running my stories through a text-to-speech program**. While I may miss a typo, since I know what I meant to say in a sentence, hearing a mechanical voice say "The walked down..." will let you catch the/they just as easily [if not more so] than reading backwards).*

Once you have gone through a story this far (and are perhaps sick of reading it over and over again) it's time to call in the beta readers—which means you're done, until you get all their notes back and have to edit to fix those.

But that's a post for another time.

Plot and Plot Holes

The Ever-Dreaded Plot Holes

Today's post comes from a seemingly simple question off twitter: "*@JessicaDall Any good advice for plot hole/ending problem solving?*"

Of course, I'd bet all of us writers wish avoiding plot holes were simple, after all, it's never fun to finish a story, get halfway through editing, and then find out that what the second half of your plot hinges on actually makes no sense. Sadly, there's very rarely an easy fix, just some that are easier than others. And so, for today, we will focus on plot holes, and I'll attempt to tackle all those sticky ending problems in another post.

For those who don't know exactly what a plot hole is, Wikipedia puts it:

"A plot hole, or plot hole, is a gap or inconsistency in a storyline that goes against the flow of logic established by the story's plot, or constitutes a blatant omission of relevant information regarding the plot. These include such things as unlikely behavior or actions of characters, illogical or impossible events, events happening for no apparent reason, or statements/events that contradict earlier events in the storyline."

Reader or writer, I think we've all been there. Even if you've never seen a book in your life, you've probably experienced plot holes. You'll find them in movies all the time. Cracked.com even came up with a list of eight movies left with gaping plot holes.

For example, *Back to the Future*:

"Marty McFly goes back in time, helps his parents get together, invents rock and roll...and everyone promptly forgets he was ever there the minute he leaves."

Nobody notices that a famous clothing brand is later named after him, nobody notices that Chuck Berry releases a song that sounds pretty similar to the one he played at the big dance, and most importantly, nobody bats an eyelid when his Mom has a kid who looks exactly like him."

Or *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*:

*"At the end of another wondrous wizarding adventure, Harry uses a magical time-travel necklace to go back and save himself and his godfather from the evil dementors... The movie treats time travel like this urgent thing: "We've made it to the past! Now we've only got a few minutes to go back and stop the dementors!" No you don't, you have as much time as you need. It's f**king time travel. If you mess up, just go back and try again."*

Now, I'm sure every writer and/or reader had come across something in a story that seems out of nowhere, or completely out of character (I know I had to change a scene in a story when my editor pointed out that it didn't make sense to have an otherwise cautious character agree to drive home with someone who'd been drinking). But what's awful about true plot holes are that they're *essential* to your story. Had that car ride been the start of the story (a story about dealing with drunk driving, perhaps) or an essential part of the plot (it leads to a car chase that absolutely has to be there) it would have been a lot more difficult to get around it than having her take a taxi home for the night.

So just how, exactly, do you get around those annoying plot holes?

1. Acknowledge/Joke about the plot hole: Also called "Lampshading" or "Lampshade Hanging", one of the easiest ways to get around a

plot hole is to simply acknowledge that, yes, it is a plot hole. For example:

"Wow, lucky this charm we've needed was right here where we just happened to be walking in a forest where we'd be lucky to ever find each other if separated."

"Yeah, what are the odds?"

Not an ideal fix, but it's better than just leaving it there for other people to pick apart. Personally, I believe this fix works best when a plot hole comes from someone acting illogically.

"Why the heck would you go and talk to that guy?"

2. Go back and change something that's less important to make the plot hole make sense:

For example, using my example of the cautious character getting in a car with someone who may or may not be safe to drive, I would have been able to get around her getting in the car by putting in somewhere much earlier that she's very cautious, except when she's drunk. That way, it would be easy to say she got drunk at the party and thus wasn't her normal self. It's easier to change than trying to rework just how you're going to rework your plot without her in the car and you have the plot hole taken care of.

What you do want to be careful of with this fix, however, is not to throw in the fact too late. Then it

seems like a blatant attempt to fix something at the last minute. For example, in a book I was editing a while back, there was a painfully obvious "oh, I need to move the plot along" moment that just made for bad writing. It seemed to go something like:

[Author is writing] *Hmm, I need to have Generic Love Interest (GLI) jump in to this river and save Heroine who is suddenly going to turn into a Damsel in Distress long enough to have them meet and fall in love. But how can I do that? I've shown up until now that she is a completely competent woman who wouldn't need anyone to save her. Oh! I got it.*

Heroine: I know we've been on this boat for half a day, but just so you know, I can't swim!

GLI: Oh, really?

Heroine: Yeah, I sure hope... AH! I just fell overboard, you need to save me since, like I just said I can't swim!

It's good the author was trying to fill in a plot hole, but if it's important that the Heroine of your story can't swim for that scene, don't mention it three seconds before she falls in. Take a little more time to edit and put it in earlier. A couple of references that maybe she's afraid of water. Heck, even when they first get in the boat, make her

uncomfortable. That way you have some precedent for when she falls overboard.

3. Outline: This might be most useful for keeping plot holes from happening in the first place, but outlining can also be a useful editing tool. Write down everything important that happens, then write down all the things that make those important things happen. It won't take as much time as completely trying to rewrite, and it will help you pinpoint where you'll be able to make changes that will either allow you to make your plot holes make sense, or change them entirely. Is there a minor character you forgot about who could make the plot point work? Add them in so the plot hole makes sense.

4. Total Rewrite: And, of course, the most dreaded of the fixes for plot holes. Completely rewriting the story from however early you need to get rid of the plot hole. Just considering it is enough to make the writer in you die a little inside, isn't it? You've spent X amount of time writing your sixty, seventy, eighty-thousand word baby (562,000 if you're Ayn Rand. Yep, that's how long Atlas Shrugged is) you've *finally* made it through a complete draft, and now you're basically going to have to start over. Still, if you can't find any other fix, a rewrite could be your best bet. And sometimes it works out for the better. Now that you know exactly what you want to do with your story, and know your characters so well, the second time

writing the same story might turn out better than you ever thought it could be.

A Wizard Did It

Today, we have the answer to part two the question: "*@JessicaDall Any good advice for plot hole/ending problem solving?*"

Since last post talked about plot holes, today we'll be talking about tricky endings.

Now, I completely understand these two concepts were grouped into one question. The concepts are similar, but where plot holes are a problem with something integral to the story, ending problems are just what they sound like—problems when you get to the all-important climax and conclusion of your story.

Unlike a plot hole, however, where you have a character/situation that doesn't make sense or is in some way against the rules of your universe, what you generally find with ending problems is that you've written the rest of the story in a way that makes it so you can't find a way to solve the problem you have spent the entire story building up.

For example, your Main Character is caught in the Big Bad's secret hideout with all his/her friends locked up and no way out. Now, if your main character is James Bond, they'll figure out some crazy escape that works. Far too often, though, authors find themselves flailing to figure out just how they're going to write their way out of the mess they've gotten themselves into.

And this is where you have to be careful not to fall into the most dreaded ending fix. The Deus Ex Machina.

What, you ask, is a Deus Ex Machina? A Latin phrase that translates to "God from the machine". Our dear friend, Wikipedia, defines it as, "*a plot device whereby a seemingly unsolvable problem is suddenly and abruptly solved with the contrived and unexpected intervention of some new event, character, ability, or object.*"

From what I remember of Drama 101 in college, Deus Ex Machinas (yeah, yeah *dei ex machina*, but...) are named for Ancient Greek Playwright, Euripides', play *Medea*, where the original "hell hath no fury" title woman has slaughtered her infant sons in revenge for her husband, Jason, leaving her for another woman. Children freshly killed, Jason comes to punish (read: kill) Medea for her crime and has her there, just about as defenseless as possible, dead sons nearby, ready to pop her head off. Escape seems impossible for poor

(read: completely insane) Medea, so how is Medea going to get out of this? Is she going to die?

Spoiler Alert: No, that would just be something silly like completely understandable for the plot. Euripides wants Medea to live, and so the chariot of the Sun God, Helios, comes down on stage (by mechanical means) and pulls her out of her predicament. Quite literally, a God in a machine saving Medea, solving Euripides' plot problem.

Now, I don't think I've ever actually seen a modern-day book which uses Deus Ex Machina quite so literally as Euripides, but that doesn't mean that seemingly unsolvable problems aren't "suddenly and abruptly solved with the contrived and unexpected intervention of some new event, character, ability, or object" in modern-day works.

Perhaps the most blatant of these moments are in situations where one of the main characters "suddenly" finds out that they had some power that has long been dormant that they only find out about just as everything seems hopeless. Often times this is found in stories with "Mary Sue" characters.

Like one of the earlier suggestions for fixing plot holes in the earlier post stated, you should not to throw in things that are going to be important to the plot too close to when they need to be used. If you're going to have something that is important come in later, try to touch on it before that exact point where it's needed. Even if it isn't a fix-all,

knowing that the main character has the ability to jump tall buildings in a single bound when threatened is better than having it just suddenly happen at the climax of the story.

And that's what makes Deus Ex Machinas so annoying. They feel like a cop out. You've spent however long reading a novel, have invested yourself in the plot and story, and just when you're supposed to get the pay off – see how it all comes together – you find that there's a proverbial "get out of jail free" card that makes the rest of the story not mean much. If the main character could have used their super-awesome teleporting skills right at the beginning, you wouldn't have needed the entire middle of the story where they're struggling through. So why did you have to read that part at all? If the wizard could have sent out that spell that just traveled halfway around the world to kill the Big Bad, why the heck didn't he?

So how do you avoid a Deus Ex Machina situation?

Like other general plot holes, it can help to outline beforehand, or put in something that makes it so they aren't saved at the possible last second by something that makes the rest of the book useless... But, truly, the most important thing in avoiding Deus Ex Machina is to **spend some time thinking about your characters**, thinking about how they would react to any given situation, and not to worry about making your story "more exciting" by building up the danger they're facing to

the point where there's simply no way they can get out of it without a lightning bolt from the heavens. Even with a little less danger, if you're able to stay within the logic of your story—and have your characters stay, well, in character—it's going to be a much more interesting, much better story than it would be by saving them by something out of nowhere that leaves the reader wondering what the point was if that's the end.

That's Just...Wrong

Most people know better than to expect everything we see in popular culture to be true. Certain things have become so commonplace in movies/literature that authors don't pause before using the misinformation in their own writing. So, for this blog, I will make it my mission to correct at least some of these unknown mistakes that won't seem to die in fiction.

1. If you're knocked out for more than a minute, it's very possible you will have brain damage. Despite what you've seen and read time and time again, if you are hit over the head and are knocked out long enough to be moved to an entirely new location (generally by the bad guys) you aren't going to wake up a little dazed and then be walking around a few seconds later. It's hard to get knocked out for a reason. If every bump on the head took

you out for ten minutes or more, many more humans would have been eaten by lions back in yonder-times. If you need a character to be out long enough to be moved, it is much more realistic if you can have them drugged. Otherwise, go for them losing consciousness briefly from a chokehold, and then have them incapacitated some other way for the move.

2. Gold bars are *heavy*. Ever dream of breaking into Fort Knox (or the New York Federal Reserve if you want to be different) throwing a bunch of gold into a duffel bag and heading out rich? It's a great "bank heist" standard after all. Yeah, gold is *dense*. The men who move gold bars around wear special toe protectors to make sure their feet aren't crushed by a dropped bar since each little bar is something like twenty pounds. By all accounts, those twenty pounds being contained in such a small object also makes each one feel more like fifty (sadly, I've never gotten to hold one to see for myself). Stick a bunch of those in a duffel bag and you're either not going to be able to lift it, or the fabric's going to tear before you get it out of the room. Have your thief characters plan accordingly.

3. The "Middle Ages" lasted for ten centuries. Look it up, what is grouped together as the Middle Ages lasted from about 400 A.D. to 1400 A.D. Fashion changed in that millennium. A lot changed in that millennium. If you're doing a historical fiction (or a time travel fantasy, "Medieval-based" fantasy) it's easy to fall into

historical inaccuracies by grouping it together as one cohesive time. Narrow down your timeframe and focus your research at least a little further than just “medieval”.

4. "Blowing up" a picture doesn't make it clearer. There are only so many pixels in a photograph. At some point, zooming in is going to just make the picture blurry (try it yourself. Find a small picture and start zooming in, or stretching it, on your computer. It will get bigger, but not get clearer). If you need a character to pick out something small from a security camera still, make sure it is very high-quality camera, or the detail is already close to the screen.

5. Defibrillation doesn't bring people back to life. The electric jolt "shock paddles" give actually are made to *stop* the heart for a split second so that the heart will "restart" with a regular beat. If the heart's already not beating, it can't help. Your best chance at that point is CPR.

6. Potatoes aren't native to Ireland. One that's more important, again, for historical/time travel fiction, even though they are associated with Ireland these days (what with the Potato Famine and all) potatoes did not exist in Europe (the "old world") prior to the Columbian Exchange. If you are writing in a setting before (approximately) 1492, be sure part of your research includes what plants and animals would be native to your location.

7. Cars don't explode. If you watch Mythbusters, you probably already know this, but cars don't tend to explode (or catch on fire) when they crash. Not unless explosives have been set inside them. Yes, gas is flammable, but car manufacturers are careful about those things. They don't want to, you know, kill their customers. If you want a “Hollywood” car explosion in your story, look into car bombs.

8. Sound doesn't travel in space. Without any matter (air) to move through, the sound waves in space aren't going to travel. Doesn't matter if it's a giant explosion or someone talking, there's some finagling you'll have to do in your sci fi for that to work.

9. Just because you aren't in the fire/explosion/lava doesn't mean you can't get burned. Heat travels away from things that cause heat. It's why, even if you aren't touching the flame, holding your finger over a candle will still end up with you getting burned. Standing next to hot lava will, likewise, burn you. Be careful of proximity when a character is walking away from an explosion or fighting near lava.

10. Elevators doors won't open onto empty shafts. As a safety mechanism, the part of the elevator that opens the doors is on the car. If the elevator is not at the floor, the doors aren't going to slide open (at least for newer models, I'm not sure about older ones if someone wants to look into

that.) It is, however, possible to get stuck in an elevator. I speak from experience there...

Language

The Problem with Pronouns

As far as parts of speech go, pronouns are not too hard to understand. Where a noun is a person, place, or thing (as School House Rock taught us all) a pronoun is a word that is used as a general substitute for a noun (for example Tommy and the dog would be nouns, he and it would be pronouns).

Since we tend to use pronouns so often in speech, people very rarely (I've found) have problems using proper pronouns when writing fiction (outside of cases where there is a genderless character, which is a different problem with if it's proper to use "it", singular "they", or some gender-neutral pronoun like "xe"). People know they don't have to write "Tommy" over and over again in a paragraph. "He" can take over and make things seem a little less cluttered.

The most common problem writers come up against, therefore, with pronouns is using them vaguely. For example:

"Tommy looked between John and himself. He was dressed in orange..."

In this case, "he" is used correctly as a pronoun. It is replacing a noun. The problem becomes, which noun is it replacing?

Perhaps it becomes a little clearer as the sentence continues (*"He was dressed in orange while Tommy was dressed in..."*) but that doesn't really fix the problem. With that first "he" the reader is now left trying to figure out which "he" is being talked about, and then go back and fit things together at the end of the sentence ("Oh, okay, Tommy's in green, that means that "he" was John"). Not only can that be annoying, but it starts killing the flow of the story. You want a reader to keep moving forward and (hopefully) get sucked into the action. You don't want them reading a sentence, jumping back to the beginning, figuring it out, and only then continuing forward. It might not take a reader too long, but it still breaks tension, and can quickly grow annoying (and that's assuming the reader *can* figure it out. Sometimes, especially in dialogue, you just have to guess in general and go with it).

So, while pronouns are a good thing in writing (it would feel clunky and unnatural to not refer to anything in your story as he, she, it, they, or so on) writers have to be careful to watch for when one pronoun can refer to two different people/objects.

This can happen in just about any scene you're writing, but here are a few examples:

1. One person; or Two people, two different genders.

In a scene where you have one character acting, or two characters written as different genders for any reason (a man and a woman; a man and a character that identifies as female; etc.) you, for the most part, are in the clear. "He" and/or "She" should only be referring to one person at a time. For example:

One person: "Tommy looked at himself. He was dressed in orange." "He" is obviously "Tommy" so there is no pronoun confusion.

Two people, different genders: "Tommy looked between Sally and himself. She was dressed in orange..." Assuming normal gender assignments, "Tommy" is not going to be referred to as "she" and thus the reader is able to assume "she" is Sally.

Dialogue between two people of different genders also becomes simpler this way as it is possible to go back and forth using simply "he said"s and "she said"s without the reader getting lost.

2. Two people, same gender.

As the first example shows, having two people in a scene who would share a pronoun (two "he"s, "she"s, or "it"s) leaves you more open to having

pronoun confusion. The trick to watch out for here is *not inserting another noun in between a noun and its intended pronoun*. Should you change the above example to *"Tommy looked at John. He was dressed in orange. Tommy didn't like orange. That was why he was wearing green."* The first sentence is directed at John and there is no other noun between "John" and the first "he" thus you don't have Tommy ("himself") and John fighting for the next pronoun. As John is not in the third sentence, there is no confusion that Tommy is the "he" wearing green.

This set up can lead you into situations where all of a sudden it becomes awkward to use pronouns in general (you want to refer to two different "he"s in a sentence but end up with:

a) *"Tommy looked at John. He didn't like how he was looking at him."*

b) *"Tommy looked at John. Tommy didn't like how he was looking at Tommy"* (since "he" and "him" would go together)

or c) *"Tommy looked at John. He didn't like how John was looking at him."*

In this case, none are the ideal (as there is room for confusion with all of them) but sometimes a situation like this comes down to the lesser of two (or three) evils. "C" would be the best choice, as you can keep one person as pronouns "Tommy"

becomes "he" and "him" while you aren't stuck only using names.

3. More than two people.

When you get into a group situation in a scene (where there are multiple people running around) do your best to only use pronouns to refrain from saying a name over and over in the same sentence ("Sally looked up, eyes narrowed. Sally said..." vs. "Sally looked up, eyes narrowed. She said"). Since the reader will have to keep track of multiple "he"s and "she"s in the scene, it's better not to make it any harder than it already is and just use names.

The Unneeded Words

Longer novels often have a harder time finding publishers. Beyond all of the generally valid reasons publishers may have for saying away from novels that start heading for hundreds of thousands of words for business reasons, there is the added fact that many long novels could do with a harsh editing before publishing—something the publishers likely don't want to spend their time doing.

A long book doesn't, by nature, always have this problem. Sometimes a story demands a long book purely to fit in the entire plot. If the story drags, however, there's more of a problem. Even if the

writing isn't quite up to purple prose levels, there are very few reasons to be unnecessarily wordy in most forms of creative writing.

And so, if you're trying to cut down on your word count, keep some of these things in mind:

1. Unnecessary Scenes. Not every scene you write will necessarily be integral to your plot. There might be a cute date night or someone running into an old friend that gives you some fun banter, but while reading the story over...it does nothing to advance the plot. Unless a scene serves a purpose, it sadly might be better to cut it—especially in a long book.

Ask yourself three questions:

- Is this scene necessary to the plot?
- Does it show us something about a character that hasn't been shown before?
- Does it have *necessary* background information that *has* to come out now (hopefully not in an info dump)?

If the answer to all three is “no”, seriously consider cutting the scene. If you can't bear to see it go, you can always save it elsewhere (I have folders for each project on my laptop with outlines, manuscripts, and a document with all the cut scenes that had to go but I still love—most just because the dialogue amuses me).

This likewise goes for laundry lists of actions. It's perfectly allowable to have time jumps in novels. The characters get in their car, and then, scene break, they pull up to their destination. You don't need pages of them talking about nothing in the car, playing the license plate game, explaining how they're changing their clothes and brushing their teeth somewhere...unless it's somehow important. Take out anything that is simply filler.

2. Info Dumps. For those not familiar, an info dump is a long section of text that gives a bunch of backstory all at once. Worst thing about info dumps? They're often unneeded (or at least parts of them are). While we authors do (or at least should) know the entire history of a character (where they grew up, how long they've been in a job, who their parents are, why they don't like so-and-so) it may or may not be important to the plot. An info dump slows down the action (Oh no! It's the villain! Looks like the Main Character's (MC) is really going to have to run for it...oh, five pages about how the villain became a villain and how he doesn't like the MC... What was going on again?) and more than likely, it won't necessary.

Pick out the important bits (do we need to know the villain was abused as a child? Does that come up later? Do we need to know he went to Villain University?) and then find a way to weave the information that isn't needed *now* in later.

3. Too much description. Now, description is good. As I've said before, it's a sad fact, but readers don't see what's happening in our heads while we're writing. Without description it's either just a bunch of people moving around empty spaces, or worse, floating dialogue. What you *don't* need is every last detail in a room. Like backstory, pick out what is important, and then weave it in as you go along.

Like everything in writing, how much description to use is a fine balance. Your MC is in a classroom. You can say there's a whiteboard, tables, a podium...whatever you see. You don't, however, need to spend a page giving every last detail, especially if it's not important. Is the exact pattern of the carpet going to come up later? Do we need to know how many posters are up and what each is of? If not, consider cutting back a bit—or a lot.

4. Wordy phrasing. While not everything has to be in its most succinct form, it's possible to cut down on your word count and make your writing/imagery stronger a lot of the time by rephrasing things. For example:

"The sheets were soaked through, made a squishing sound when Sam moved."

Not awful, and it's good to get senses involved in a scene (too often people forget smell and sound for sight when writing). But I would edit it like this:

"The sheets were soaked through, squished when Sam moved."

Squishing would also work, but since squish is an onomatopoeia, "squished" gives me the same sound as "made a squishing sound". You have the same effect, and give a stronger feeling, without all the words couching the sound. Now the sentence has gone from twelve words to nine. And chopping out three words at a time in a 200,000-word novel can add up quickly.

5. Redundancy. Has it been said before? Cut it. No matter how important a fact is, repeating it over and over isn't just space consuming, it gets annoying.

"All the same, she was happy to be there."

Two paragraphs later.

"Happy to be there, she..."

A paragraph later.

"She really was happy to be there."

We get it, we get it, she's happy to be there. If a point is exceedingly important, maybe say it twice, but more likely than not, the reader will get the point after something is said once. That means you can take out at least eleven words there ("Happy to be there" and "She really was...") Again, that adds up.

This likewise goes with scenes that are redundant. Did your MC already talk about how he really

wishes he could go home? Maybe you need to restate that later, but you don't need to spend multiple scenes with the character talking about the same thing. Especially not if it is something the character is complaining about. A lot of complaining, whining, or angsting gets old quickly. Namely because a character is continuously complaining about something, but doing nothing to fix it. If that happens, the plot doesn't move forward and the character seems one-note.

6. Unneeded Words. And, last but not least—what this blog is titled after—all those little words that sneak in that really don't need to be there. I believe, so far this year, I have yet to return an edited manuscript that isn't at least 1,000 words shorter than when I got it (even with adding in needed words/sentences). Even without the other things on this list, there always tends to be unnecessary words.

Now there are plenty of words that can be unnecessary depending on context, but the three I find myself deleting the most are "up", "very", and "that".

Now, if you have someone look up, yes you need up, but often I find "She stood up" or "She raised her hand up" For the first, there isn't much difference between "She stood" and "She stood up" Up is contributing nothing. For the second, raising implies "up" You don't "raise your hand down" thus you don't need to specify.

"Very" is a modifier that "very" often gets abuse. I know I use it all the time (you can probably find plenty of "very"s in this blog). Mostly, though, "very"s get cut before adverbs/adjectives in my editing.

"He ran very quickly."

"Her singing was very beautiful."

Very can bog the sentence down, and they change "very" little. It's still possible to picture someone running quickly or singing beautiful without modifying it with "very"

As for "that" I have a bit of a vendetta, I admit. Let's look at some examples:

"I hope that I don't fall."

"It was comforting knowing that she wasn't alone."

"He couldn't believe that he had been there so long."

There's nothing technically wrong with those sentences, but let's get rid of those "that"s:

"I hope I don't fall."

"It was comforting knowing she wasn't alone."

"He couldn't believe he had been there so long."

Have the sentences lost any of their meaning by taking out "that"? Not really.

So, depending on how often you use unneeded "up"s, "very"s, or "that"s in sentences, you can cut your word count down substantially just by taking out words that don't serve a purpose.

All of a sudden, he was suddenly there

Today's question: "*Somewhere I heard that you should never use "suddenly" or "all of a sudden" in writing... I was just wondering if this was true or not?*"

Now, before we start, it's always important to remember that "never" is an abused word when it comes to writing tips. There are certain things that can make your writing weaker—such as over using "to be" verbs, or adverbs, or...—but it's just as much of a problem if you hinder your writing by avoiding things like "to be" verbs or adverbs at all cost. Advice that begins with the word "never" should always be taken with a grain of salt. Or, as my friend likes to joke, "*Never take advice that begins with the word 'never'.*"

That said, I don't believe trying to stay away from using "suddenly", "immediately", "all of a sudden", etc. in your writing is a bad idea. Beyond the fact that it sometimes falls into the category of "unneeded words", using "suddenly" and its

partners often has the exact opposite effect of what you want it to in writing. It makes the action seem less, well, sudden.

This comes down to one of the biggest problems in writing action scenes. Where in a movie or the like you're able to control the pacing (wait just another second and then *bam* Monster is there out of nowhere) each reader reads at their own pace. It's possible that they'll read slowly enough to where there seems to be little tension, or have to do something and set the book down, or get distracted, or any other number of things that you can't control for as an author.

So how, then, are we supposed to get that same jump-through-yourself moment you have in the movie? Use "suddenly" right? That's what it means after all, all of a sudden. "Suddenly the monster appeared." It makes sense.

Counter-intuitively, however, putting in another word makes the entire action *less* sudden to a reader.

Often when editing, I'll put in the suggestion to **keep sentences short in high action scenes**. You can't control much about the pacing as far as how your readers read a scene, but sentence length and paragraph breaks are a good way of speeding up and slowing down action. The shorter you keep a sentence the more immediate the action is. For example: "He ran." Two words, the reader knows

exactly what's happening and is on to the next piece of information. Make it longer, however—"He began to run"—means it's going to take the reader longer to make it through one action. The longer it takes to read something, the slower the action feels. The same goes for breaks. When reading, a comma is a generally a quick pause in the reader's mind. A period is a full stop. Commas blur things together. Periods break them apart. Therefore:

"She looked around, and then the monster was there."

Seems to move more slowly than.

"She looked around. The monster was there."

The same goes for using "suddenly" "all of a sudden" etc. "The monster was there" takes four words to get us from point A to point B. "All of a sudden, the monster was there" takes double that (and has a natural pause in reading it with the comma).

By writing that the action is sudden, we have successfully made the action that much less sudden in the pacing of the scene.

As with all of my other advice, you shouldn't take this tip as gospel law. If "suddenly" makes a sentence flow more smoothly, use it. If it seems entirely necessary, *use it*. It is just one more piece of

advice telling you to look carefully when you feel the need to point out something is sudden.

Critique Groups

How to Take a Critique

Now, I fully believe being a writer helps you be a good editor. The two don't necessarily go together (I've met some editors who are awful writers and some writers who are awful editors) but part of both jobs is to have a good ear (eye?) for what sounds right on the page.

The other way around, though, I don't think there's quite as strong a connection. Great editors can be great writers, of course, but all the other little things that make for a good editor don't necessary flip straight over to being a good writer.

What being an editor does do for writing, however, is help you take critiques.

Luckily for my editor side, every author I have recently worked with has been great (thank you all if you're reading) but I know very well how bad things can get when you're editing something for someone who really just wanted a pat on the head to say how good their work is.

The writer in me fully understands how hard it can be sometimes to have someone ripping apart your work. As much as I might not like something I've written, it seems to fall into a "no one can beat up my little brother (erm, writing) but me!" situation when someone else starts pointing out flaws.

Still, to get the most out of editing/critiques, you have to fight down that urge to automatically defend yourself, so, some important things you can do to make editing most helpful and least painful:

1. Listen silently. This is perhaps most important if you're speaking with your critiquer/editor in person, but the same holds true any time you're reading comments. Don't start defending yourself before they're done speaking. It's hard—believe me, I know—but sit silently, listen to/read what they have to say, and then take a deep breath before going forward. It's possible your reviewer/editor/critiquer has no idea what they're talking about, but cutting them off to tell them that (or not reading a comment because you disagree) won't help you at all. Listen, absorb, *then* speak.

2. Just because the edit is "wrong" doesn't mean you should ignore it. Ok, this of course doesn't go for edits that make a sentence *grammatically* incorrect, or that introduce typos (sometimes, especially with MS Word Track Changes, typos can appear based on where the program thinks you want something deleted. If you

suddenly have "I had a boat" feel free to take off the extra 'd'). This goes for an edit that reworks a sentence into something you didn't mean. For example, in my recently edited manuscript, the editor changed this sentence:

"The girl stood outside, half-hidden under the overhang."

to

"The girl stood, half-hiding on the overhang outside."

Um, no. I didn't mean the girl was hiding on top of the overhang, I meant the overhang was hiding her. (Someone on the second story can only see part of her past the overhang). Those sentences mean two very separate things, and I definitely didn't mean the second one. Still, that doesn't mean I automatically reject the change and move on. It is more helpful to go back, explain that's not what you meant, and ask if there's something that would make the sentence clearer. It's possible the editor was reading too quickly, but it's also possible that "under the overhang" was confusing the image in her head and some other rewording would fix that.

3. Critiques/Reviews/Edits aren't personal.

All right, if the review is "Your writing sucks, your parents should be ashamed of having you as a child" or something along those lines, you're more than welcome to think the reviewer is a jerk and

ignore them. Most of the time, however, edits aren't personal attacks on you, or even your writing. A comment that says, "This part is dragging, I'd be tempted to stop reading" or the like isn't an attack. It's an honest opinion that says that some of your readers might be getting bored and skip ahead (or worse, set the book down all together). Don't be hurt by it, take it as a chance to rework the section so people *love* reading it.

4. It's okay to disagree with your editor/reviewer/critiquer. Going along with not throwing out an idea just because it's not what you mean, it's also all right to completely disagree with your editor on some points. Editors aren't perfect, it's possible they've changed something that you know you had right (and have the grammar guide to back you up on). It's possible they just aren't familiar with a word and thus changed it to something that doesn't quite mean what you meant. If they're connected to your publisher, yes, you'll have to work it out with them (often publishers have final say), but if it's a friend or someone you've hired for an edit/critique it's all just suggestions as to what they think would be best. You can take or leave any of the changes.

5. Figure out if you actually want a critique. While I fully believe all writing can only be its best after some outside edits (be them from a friend, professional editor, or publisher) some people really just don't want them. If you don't want to work on your story/don't want anything changed,

ask someone to go through and look for typos, and then move on. As a professional editor, I've had one or two cases of people who—while they are willing to pay for me to go over their work—don't actually want me to tell them I'd suggest changes. For the most part, it just ends in several emails about how all my edits are wrong, and me giving up and only pointing out typos and things that are blatantly wrong/confusing to keep them happy. If you want to pay me content edit prices for copy edit work, fine, I won't stop you, but it would save money and headaches to just say you want a copy edit/proofreading*.

Edits (good ones at least) help make a story the best it can be, and as hard as it might be, not trying to defend yourself, is the best way to make your writing better. Nobody is perfect. Nobody's writing is perfect. If you're willing to hear that, even an imperfect editor can help make your writing that much better.

**Before hiring anyone to edit your work, it's always good to get an editing sample—even if they've come very highly recommended—so you can see if how they edit is what you're looking for. Offering a 5-page sample edit isn't just how I prove myself, it's how I make sure my clients would be happy with my editing style. Edits should be helpful, not a headache.*

Crises of Confidence

By the end of 2014, I will have six novels out—four from 2014 alone. As great as that is overall, it also means that I have almost non-stop had giant files of edits from my editors sitting in my inbox to go over.

Now, I'm certainly not saying that I am not appreciative for the edits. Even as an editor myself, I am very aware that there are things in my own writing that slip past me that I would catch on the other side of things (the danger of being too close to your own writing). I am, in fact, very grateful to have someone going over my stories before they're out there for the whole world to see.

However, that doesn't make it much easier to open those files and look at those manuscripts all marked up. I've talked about how to best take a critique, and I've been through enough to do pretty well on the not taking edits personally front, but that doesn't always stop another relatively common writer experience, the crisis of confidence.

Now, getting edits/critiques back are a prime time for them to happen, but crises of confidence can come up at any point in the writing process. Perhaps you're reading your first edit from an editor, perhaps you're looking over your first draft, perhaps you're even still in the middle of writing, I think most writers are at least acquainted with that

lingering feeling of, "Man, I'm really not good at this whole writing thing, am I?"

We all go through it, and in the worst cases, it sometimes stops us from writing a story we otherwise were really excited to tell. After all, just look at what you wrote. It sucks. Obviously the entire story would suck if you kept writing. What's the point? Or if you already finished it, look how awful it is in general. Wouldn't it just be better to forget it somewhere in your room/on your desk/in your computer's hard drive forever?

Of course there are going to be some stories you give up on/forget about. I have a good share of half-completed story ideas (ranging anywhere from just started to half a book) that I may never get back to. I have at least two earlier novels that I finished but just don't find it worth the time to actually do anything with at this point. It's okay if you run out of steam every once in a while, or just wrote something for the hell of it and now want to forget about it completely. It only becomes a problem if these crises keep you from writing all together.

In many ways, this is the problem NaNoWriMo was created to battle. By forcing a hard deadline, participants are forced to "ignore their inner editors" and get the words down on paper, for better or worse. People tend to have their own opinions on the quantity vs. quality debate there, but it's not a bad solution, in my opinion, when it comes to trying to fight a crisis of confidence. If it's

possible for you to simply ignore that little voice in your head that's telling you your book sucks and keep writing one way or another, that's a good thing.

Unfortunately that's easier said than done sometimes. And so, some tips for getting past the "I'm an awful writer" blues, at all stages of writing:

First things first, **you're your own toughest critic**. When you're having a crisis of confidence, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, you're likely going to be harder on yourself than anyone else reading your writing. Where you wouldn't be so hard on someone else you were critiquing ("There's some telling here, can you try to show?") you're probably going to tear into yourself ("*What* is with all this telling. Your writing is awful. Why do you even try?") Ignore the urge to give into self-flagellation, and, no matter where you are in the writing/editing process, leave yourself a quick note and keep working.

While Still Writing (Tips for getting past a crisis of confidence while in the middle of a work-in-progress)

1. First drafts are supposed to suck. Ok, maybe "suck" is a little harsh, and I'm sure there are some Mozart writers out there (the ones who have stories that come out nearly perfectly first go around) but having problems in your first draft doesn't mean that you aren't a good writer. Maybe

the dialogue between your two characters sounds awful right now, but that's all right, it's a first draft. As long as you have the basic Point A leads to Point B leads to Point C stuff down, it's fine. No one is going to be judging your writing skills off of an un-edited first draft. You shouldn't either.

2. You can always edit later. Here's the "locking up your inner editor" thing you see so often on the NaNoWriMo forums. The important part when in the writing stages of your Work in Progress (WIP) is to actually *write*. Maybe you aren't a quantity over quality person. That's okay. You don't have to word vomit (write everything that passes through your head in one go just to get it on the page), you just have to give yourself permission to not be perfect. Write as quickly or as slowly as you want, just don't obsess about one sentence that is giving you problems. Get it good enough for a first draft, and then leave yourself a note to come back to it when you've moved on to editing. Don't rush yourself if you're not that type of writer, but don't throw your entire story off the rails just because you're beating yourself up about one line that just sounds wrong.

3. Jump to a different scene. All right, this one doesn't always work for everyone. Some people write best chronologically. If you have a strong outline, however, or are just fine with writing scenes in varying orders, jumping to someplace later in the book can be a good way to get you out of our funk. So what if the entire beginning seems to

be a boring info dump? Look at how exciting the climax is. You can always fix things up when you're feeling better about your writing as a whole.

4. Take a short break. Emphasis on the word *short*. You don't want to lose your momentum, but don't force yourself if you're in the grandmother of all slumps. Stop trying to force the writing, and perhaps do something more productive than staring at a blank page/computer screen. Do a character drawing, try to plot out how the Main Character's house looks, or read another book that might inspire you. Just don't let "not today" turn into "not this week" turn into "not this month" turn into "I once tried writing a novel..."

While self-editing (Tips for getting past a crisis of confidence while attempting to edit/rewrite a draft)

1. First drafts are supposed to suck, second drafts can too. Again, you don't have to aim for perfection straight out of the gate. If you aren't a Mozart writer, and don't have divinely inspired words on the page, expect for there to be multiple rounds of edits before you have something you'll even consider showing to other people. Just because something seems bad now doesn't mean you won't make it great once you've finished edits.

2. You don't have to keep all of it. Is it really just that first scene that isn't working for you? You can always rework it, rewrite it, or cut it all together. Just because it ended up on the page in

your rough draft doesn't mean that it has to stay in the story for all eternity. Speaking as someone who does word vomit during NaNoWriMo, an entire character from 2010's novel found herself cut before the book was even shown to beta readers. She just wasn't working, and wasn't important enough to save, sadly.

3. See if someone else can give you some pointers. If you get the general feeling that your story is awful, but have no idea how to fix it (and you're brave enough to let someone else take a look) it can be very helpful to have someone give you some suggestions (that will likely be less harsh than your inner critics suggestions of "you suck" and "why do you even try"). One caveat, however: Try to find someone who is also a writer, and editor, or at least a very avid reader. Writers and editors will probably be better at telling you the exact points you can focus on perfecting where casual readers (friends/family/etc.) are more likely to give you less helpful comments such as "I liked it" or "It was okay".

Side tip: If you're shy about sharing a rough draft that's probably in pretty, well, rough shape, try finding an online critique forum rather than talking to someone in person. It's sometimes easier to send a story (or even just a scene from a story) off to another faceless writer than to go up to someone you know in person.

After a critique/edit (Tips for getting past a crisis of confidence while reading over someone else's edits to your work)

1. Nobody's perfect. Even if you've edited your story thirty times yourself, there are still going to be problems you've missed. Expect for a sea of red (or at least a lot of comments) to come back on any story. It doesn't mean that you aren't a good writer, it means the editor/critic had different thoughts about some scenes. In fact, if your critic/editor is any good, you'll actually hope for a lot of comments/suggestions. Creative writing, like any art, is subjective. The comments are just ways you'll be able to see what people with other writing styles prefer, and you can decide if they help make your writing better or if they're just something to think about. A good editor will mark everything they think while going along so you can decide what you think is best, not because they're telling you you're a bad writer.

2. It's just one more chance to make your writing even better. Until the second your book is on the shelves and you can't get them back, you constantly have chances to make your writing better. Perhaps you're still beating yourself up about how awful one scene is, *especially* now that your critic/editor has agreed how awful it is. But you have the story back, you can make it better. And now you have someone to work with to make it better. I promise, not all is lost.

And, for my final general tip: **Cut yourself some slack.** Some people might naturally seem to be better authors than others, but that doesn't mean that you'll never live up to that. Even the best author out there didn't pop out into the world as a brilliant writer (they at least would have to learn to write first, after all), and even then, they had editors, and publishers, and a whole team of people behind them to make their writing sparkle. You will grow as an author, you will get better with edits, it isn't fair to try to measure your WIP against someone else's published work. Give yourself a break, and just write.

The Nitty-Gritty

Does Length Matter?

As December firmly takes hold, the authors who did NaNoWriMo in November tend to either wander off to nurse their wounds and take some well-deserved time off or dive right back into trying to finish their novels and/or edit some sense into the words they managed to churn out over the month.

I, personally, am doing my best to finish up the tail end of my NaNoWriMo project and it's seeming the novel will likely be topping off around 80k words—about where I was aiming.

For you see, though it is called National **Novel** Writing Month, the 50k word goal of NaNoWriMo often leaves authors in the odd nether-space when it comes word count. While 50k words is long for a novella, it's not really considered a novel by many publishers. And so, just like “too long” books can have a mark against them when it comes to publishing, so can “too short”.

Looking at the Wiki article on word count, it is listed:

Classification	Word Count
Novel	Over 40,000 words
Novella	17,500 to 40,000 words
Novellette	7,500 to 17,500 words
Short story	Under 7,500 words

You could also likely add:

Flash fiction	Under 1,000 words
---------------	-------------------

But then, what am I on about? 50k is certainly over 40k words. That makes a 50k word book a novel. When you start looking around at submission guidelines however you start finding things like:

"Preferred word counts are between 75,000 and 120,000."

- or -

"We rarely publish anything under 80,000 words."

And so, with a 50k word novel, many authors find themselves too short by half to have many traditional publisher take their works seriously. And that can feel like a bit of a kick in the teeth.

So what should you do? Try to whittle the story down into a novella? Beef it up into a novel? Well, there are a few things to consider.

1. EDIT.

This should be a no-brainer, but it is a bad idea to take any first draft you have written (especially one written in a month), pop together a query letter, and start sending it out to agents/publishers as is. It's a bad idea to even think that your first draft will be exactly what you'll have once you've gone through and edited. Perhaps there are useless scenes you've thrown in just to keep writing that you'll chop, lowering the word count over all. Perhaps you'll realize there was an entire subplot you never fleshed out and add several thousand more words to your novel working that out. Don't assume 50k is the length your manuscript will be when you start shopping around.

2. Look into standards for your genre.

Yes, many publisher don't really like to look at things that are under 70k words or so, but there are some genres where 50k is exactly in line with what publishers want (for example, mid-grade fiction and Romance novels). *Don't read this blog post and automatically start beefing up your story because you think you need to.* You might have written something in a genre that doesn't *want* long stories.

3. Consider your publishing goals.

So you're writing in a genre that does want something longer than 50k (Fantasy, for example, is notorious for wanting longer manuscripts). Consider if those are the presses you want to go after. Want to go after big-name publishers/agents and fight for that big advance and first run? Conforming to industry standards will definitely make it a little easier for you along an undoubtedly hard trail. Planning on self-publishing, or even going after small/e-publishes? You might not have to. Many e-publishes quite like shorter books, and small presses aren't under the same pressure to look for things that only fit with what is out there already. If you're happy with your manuscript as it is, look for places that won't punt it because of word count.

4. Consider subplot

So you want to beef up a story but it really seems like your story tapped itself out at 50k. Consider if

there are any subplots you want to add. When I first started writing short stories (after starting off as a novelist) I was told the main thing to keep in mind is that short stories tend to follow one or two characters from A to B and that's the end. Novels, on the other hand, have a full range of characters, and don't have to only tell A to B. A to B can be the most important part of the story, but other things can be happening at the same time. Often there is a romantic subplot in stories (characters are going from A to B, but Male Main Character [MMC] and Female Main Character [FMC] are also falling in love) but there is no reason a subplot couldn't be something entirely different. The characters are going from A to B, but MMC is also dealing with a severe illness. They're going from A to B, but FMC is also doing her best to get into a good college. Think about the world around your characters and see if there is something that can be added that builds the story up.

5. Add descriptions/dialogue.

If you're like me and tend to write large amounts of dialogue, go through your novel and look for places where you can add more description. What does the room they're sitting in look like? What are your characters seeing? Don't overdo it, but there should be plenty of places to build up your world while also increasing word count.

Alternatively, if you are primarily a narration writer, look at where you can add dialogue. More

than once while editing I have come across something along the lines of "He told them about X" in a narration-heavy manuscript. If the reader already knows about X, there's no reason to rehash it, but if it's the first time it has been mentioned, why not expand it into actual dialogue? Not only will you expand word count, you'll also move from telling your reader about what's happening to showing them.

6. DON'T add in meaningless filler.

Adding a subplot does *not* mean adding "filler" There shouldn't be scenes that don't have some purpose (slowing down the main story to show two characters grocery shopping just to add words is not a good idea). Likewise, adding description/dialogue does *not* mean throwing in walls of text/meaningless dialogue just to make a piece longer. Tolkien may have been able to get away with it, but taking three pages to wax poetic about a tree is a good way to have readers stop reading. And there is only so long readers will read seemingly meaningless dialogue before they put the book down. If your story is tight and flows well as it is, don't sink it just for word count. Quality is still more important than quantity.

Eh, it's not my style

One of my favorite things a high school writing teacher ever told me was that English classes in school are to teach you all the rules so you'll know which ones to break when you start writing creatively. Now, there are some "rules" you can't get around using without sounding like you don't speak English very well, but starting sentences with conjunctions, ending with prepositions, and split infinitives are all "rules" English classes teach that become less than important when writing a poem, short story, or a novel. As an editor, I know the correct use of who and whom, but if an author is writing dialogue for a *character* who doesn't, I'm hardly going to force a "whom" into their mouths. In such cases, the overall style of the writing is more important than each and every (sometimes arbitrary) writing rule.

Now, this fact should not be taken as *carte blanche* to write however you want with the argument that it's your style and therefore good writing. Style is about making conscious choices about how a character would speak (for example, it might be appropriate to have malapropisms for a character who's trying to sound smarter than they are) not about excusing poor writing (if *you* have made an unintended malapropism, it's probably for the best someone catches that before you start sending your manuscript out).

Note: It is also important to state that even if you have made an intentional style choice, it doesn't necessarily make that style "good" writing. A

stylistic choice is more subjective as to if it's good or bad, but you can still have "bad" writing when you've made a conscious choice.

So, you've made it through your manuscript and consciously chosen which writing rules you want to use for each character and which ones you don't. Sarah's character is exceedingly proper and uses every arbitrary grammar rule on the books. Her best friend, Jane, is much more colloquial. Awesome. You have some great characterization starting with just that jumping off point. But what about all those little writing rules you have never quite gotten an answer about? Will adding an extra 's' in James's look out of place with all of Sarah's 'whom's and 'am I not's? Does James' mean there's more than one James? Has anyone actually given us an answer on that?

In fact, not really. Unlike being able to mark "he am" as an improper conjugation, all of the following "problems" don't have one correct answer. So what should you do when it comes to some object belonging to a James? The trick is to **simply be consistent**. If you use James' five times, don't use James's on the sixth.

Since consistency is the real issue here, groups that deal with a number of different writers/authors (such as newspapers or publishers) tend to follow one of a number of "style guides". Instead of keeping a record of what is correct and incorrect grammatically, these style guides help writers

remain consistent from one person to the next. So while there isn't really a "right" answer when it comes to any of the following problems, there are some style guides writers can choose to follow in the hope of remaining consistent within their industry. While academic papers often use APA or MLA style guides, and journalists tend to use AP Style, most publishers I've come across use Chicago Manual of Style (CMS) when combating all of these "style" issues. So, if you're a creative writer and wish to follow a style guide, CMS is your best bet.

And so, here are some tips on what to do about some of the most common "I've heard it both ways" writing issues out there:

1. Serial Comma. Also called the Oxford or Harvard comma, serial commas come into play when you're listing multiple items.

For example: I went to the store to get apples, oranges, peaches, and grapes. Now, if you can't tell, that last comma in the list is bolded. Why? Because people can't agree if that comma needs to be there or not. Personally, I use the serial comma (which is what CMS suggests, so most novels use them as well) but, grammatically, you don't have to have a comma there. "I went to the store to get apples, oranges, peaches and grapes" is still just as grammatically correct.

Of course, serial commas can save you some trouble, as a relatively famous internet meme shows

us. "We invited the strippers, JFK, and Stalin" doesn't necessarily read the same as "We invited the strippers, JFK and Stalin". With the comma, you have a list. Without the comma, it possibly sounds like the strippers *are* JFK and Stalin. Just a little difference. Of course, it would be possible to clear that up with changing the sentence slightly rather than using a serial comma (We invited JFK, Stalin and the strippers), but personally I, and CMS, prefer not getting into that mess to start with.

What CMS Says: Use serial commas.

2. Periods in Abbreviations. Most recently, my friends and I got into a debate as to whether Los Angeles should be abbreviated "LA" or "L.A." (yes, we're all language nerds). As with everything else on this list, both are "correct" (nobody is going to see LA or L.A. and immediately shake their head at what a poor editor your book must have had, but...

What CMS Says: Put a period after every abbreviated word (abbrev., Rev.) unless it is a technical abbreviation (cm for centimeters, etc.) and a period between each letter in an abbreviation that is comprised of multiple words (U.S.A. rather than USA and L.A. instead of LA)

3. Possessives ending with 's'. Always the quintessential "What should we do...?" question. 's being singular and s' being plural doesn't quite work when you have a name that already ends with 's'. Most people tend to go with whichever they find

less confusing/sounds better to them. In this case, it's more important that you're consistent between words rather than as a whole (you could have James's and then Atlantis' if you like, just don't have James's and then James').

What CMS Says: Use 's if monosyllabic (James's, Burns's) but only an apostrophe if more than one syllable (Artemis', Jesus')

4. Writing out numbers. Numbers like making things difficult. They come in English words (one, two, three...) *and* Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3...), and that's not even mentioning other systems such as Roman numerals (I, II, III...). So are we supposed to write them out, use the Arabic numbers, or do something else entirely? It's up to you and your style guide. Personally I tend to write numbers out when writing, but I see plenty of people use the Arabic numbers. (I haven't seen anyone use Roman numerals in their writing [other than chapter headings] but that might just be a difficulty thing).

What CMS Says: Write out numbers 1 - 99 (one through ninety-nine) and then use Arabic numbers for anything larger than two digits (100, 4500, 5,430,458,302). *Note: There are special rules for percentages, times, and other special uses of numbers. Refer to your style guide if you aren't sure one way or the other.*

5. British vs. American Spellings. When it comes to picking British or American spellings of

words (colour vs. color; programme vs. program) it's generally best to stick to what you're used to. Did you grow up in a country that taught "British English"? Then stick to that. Are you more comfortable with American spellings? Use those. The more you try to force yourself to use spellings that you aren't used to, the more likely you are to start flopping between the two. And it's correct to use either, even if your characters are British when you're American, or American when you're British. The main thing to take away here, as always, is to *be consistent*. People worked to standardize spellings for a reason. It makes things easier/less distracting to read.

What CMS Says: Being an American-made guide (the "Chicago" in the name isn't there by random chance) CMS suggests the American spelling of words (behavior, jeweled, etc.) however most publishers have an "in-house" style guide that will take precedence in this case. If they have no problem with whatever spelling you have used, they'll leave it alone. If they do, their editors will change it. As long as you are consistent one way or the other, it won't affect your submission chances.

6. Italicizing vs. Underlining. When it comes to emphasizing a word, people tend to either *italicize* it or underline it. Both obviously are ways of setting one word apart from the others in a sentence. Most style guides (including CMS) prefer italics to underlines when it comes to added emphasis (as they are less intrusive on a page while still adding

emphasis when read) but I have met more than one publisher that prefers underlines, at least in manuscripts. Feel free to use whichever you prefer (I personally default to italics per CMS), just be careful if a publisher specifically asks for one over the other in a submission.

What CMS Says: Italicize when going for emphasis, but do so sparingly.

7. Double Spaces After Periods. Oh the flame wars about whether or not you need two spaces after a period. There have been a number of articles about whether or not people should keep doing so. Many older typists had the necessity of hitting the space bar twice after the end of each sentence drilled into them with no mercy. Some teachers still teach this. The fact is, while hitting space twice on a typewriter might have been useful, most word processing systems have an algorithm that makes for a little extra space after an end of a sentence anyway. Hitting the space bar twice only serves to make too large of a gap at the end of each sentence. Is it incorrect to add double spaces at the end of a sentence? Technically no. Is it unnecessary (or possibly hazardous) when typing on anything but a typewriter? It can be.

What CMS Says: Their official line is, "There is no reason for two spaces after a period in published work." They further go on to state their reasons as to saying "no" to double spaces: *(1) it is inefficient, requiring an extra keystroke for every*

sentence; (2) even if a program is set to automatically [watch for] an extra space after a period, such automation is never foolproof; (3) there is no proof that an extra space actually improves readability; (4) two spaces are harder to control for than one in electronic documents; and (5) two spaces can cause problems with line breaks in certain programs.

"Intensive Purposes"

Ok, I'll be the first to admit I haven't always gotten sayings right. Homophones, similar words, it's easy enough to get a phrase wrong. Some are so common, it's likely you might not realize they aren't the actual saying. Here's a few I've recently cleared up in my editing:

(For the purposes of this article, the incorrect phrase will be **bolded** with its intended meaning following. The *proper* saying will be **bolded and underlined** in the paragraph following)

- **Intensive Purposes.** (Meaning: "For every functional purpose; in every practical sense; in every important respect; practically speaking.") This is the one I saw this morning editing, and what sparked this blog post. I actually thought this was the saying myself up until a couple of years ago when I was corrected. It makes sense,

"for all intensive purposes..." the purposes are important, intense...but no. The correct form is **Intents and Purposes**. So why isn't intensive purposes correct? Because the saying comes from a 16th century English law, originally "to all intents, constructions, and purposes." Shortened to "intents and purposes" it's now easily mistaken for "intensive purposes"

- **Per Say**. (Meaning: As such; as one would expect from the name). A mistake that's easy to understand (after all, it basically just comes out and says "as it says", right?) the saying is actually **Per Se**. Why? Because it's Latin. Se might not be an English word, but in Latin, "se" means "itself" (or himself or herself depending, but we'll just stick with "itself"). Therefore, per se means "by itself".

- **Wallah**. (Meaning: There it is, ta-da, presto). Another misunderstanding of a foreign word. When people write "Wallah!" they generally are trying to write "**Voila!**" (a French word coming from the words *vois* [to look] and *la* [there or it]) as. While it might more technically come out to "look there!" it's generally used (in France and in the English-speaking world) as "Here it is!" or "Ta da!" (for example "You add some ribbon, and *voila!* A new dress!")

As added incentive to use the proper spelling, "Wallah" is itself a word meaning: "One employed in a particular occupation or activity" (coming from a Hindi word [vala] meaning "pertaining to or

connected with"). Not what I think people mean when they say something along the lines of "Wallah! A new dress!"

- **Say "I"**. (Meaning: I agree). Perhaps it isn't a foreign language misunderstanding, but this one is a replacing a common English word with one a little more obscure. Aye. Say "I" generally makes sense in the context (If you consider it something along the lines of: "If you agree, volunteer yourself.") but "**Say 'Aye'**" makes even more sense, quite literally meaning "yes". So "say 'aye' " is asking people to say yes to a vote.

- **Bunker Down**. (Meaning: to take shelter; to assume a defensive position to resist difficulties). This mistake comes from a combination of places, I think. 1) taking the military phrase "bunk down" (meaning to go to bed) and 2) misunderstanding the proper phrase **Hunker Down**. While it might make sense to have "bunker down" as an extension of "bunking down" a bunker is "a bin or tank especially for fuel storage, as on a ship" or "an underground fortification" While it is possible to make "bunker" a verb, the verb forms are bunkered, bunkering, and bunkers, never just bunker. Hunker, on the other hand, means "To squat close to the ground", "To take shelter, settle in, or hide out", or "To hold stubbornly to a position" Bunker might make sense if you ignore the noun/verb problem, but hunker undoubtedly makes more sense.

- **Reek Havoc.** (Meaning: to cause a lot of trouble or damage). The "havoc" part of this saying doesn't need much explanation. After all, havoc means: "wide and general destruction: devastation". So, since you have the destruction part of "cause a lot of damage" all you need is the "a lot". Reek means "to give off or become permeated with a strong or offensive odor" so, metaphorically, it could make sense. Someone who "reeks charm" gives off a lot of charm, so someone who "reeks havoc" causes a lot of destruction. The saying, however is **Wreak Havoc**, which makes slightly more sense with one of the meanings of "wreak" being to "inflict or take vengeance". Rather than giving off havoc ("reeking" havoc) someone is inflicting havoc (wreaking havoc).

- **Hone In.** (Meaning: Directing yourself toward/zooming in on a target). Like the others, hone in generally makes sense. Meaning "to sharpen" or "to perfect" it's possible to understand hone in as sharpening your direction or sight towards a target. The correct saying, however, is **Home In**. Coming from the idea of homing pigeons, which were commonly used in the 19th Century to deliver messages, home in now covers anything that's directing itself towards a target (such as missiles). So HOMing pigeons=HOME in.

Of course, this might be starting to fall under the "popular use changes the lexicon" phenomenon. With enough people using this saying incorrectly,

it's possible it will start being accepted as "hone in" (even if that's not the original saying).

- **Maul It Over.** (Meaning: take your time to think about something). One of the funnier mistakes I've found, I'm sure it comes from "maul" sounding similar to "mull". Of course, a maul is a heavy hammer and to maul is to beat, bruise, mangle, or handle roughly. While I suppose it's possible to maul a thought, people generally are looking for the slightly less violent **Mull It Over**. While, interestingly enough, to mull something can mean to pulverize it, mull over a thought is using mull's second meaning: "to consider at length: ponder" You are considering a thought at great length, not beating it up.

- **Mute Point.** (Meaning: a point that has been rendered irrelevant). While this "mute point" might have originally meant "[a point that is] to be definitively determined by an assembly of the people" it currently means (at least in the US) that the point is irrelevant to whatever is happening. And that's why mute makes sense, yes? Someone who is mute can't talk, you don't need to talk about that point, wallah (cough, voila) you have a mute point. Properly, however a "mute point" is actually a **Moot Point** While the definition of "moot" might not help explain why it's "moot" not "mute" (moot meaning "subject to debate, dispute, or uncertainty") a moot point comes from a law student practice (starting in the 16th century) of participating in "moot cases". Using these practice

or hypothetical cases, the students could discuss hypothetical case law. Thus, a point in a moot case was hypothetical, and often not relevant to actual cases, bringing us Moot Points.

- **Squash Their Hope.** (Meaning: Kill someone's hope; stop someone from hoping something will happen). This mistake may make the most sense. You're trying to kill someone's hope. If you squash a bug, you kill it. Ergo "Squash their hope" makes sense. Though a valid conclusion, the saying is actually **Quash Their Hope**. Perhaps a little more obscure (but two hundred years older than the word "squash") quash means "to make void, annul, crush." So, while "squash" might be the same sort of idea (crushing something) quash brings along all sorts of other fun meanings. (Not only are you crushing someone's hope, you're "defeating it forcibly".)

- **Ripe with Conflict.** (Meaning: Conflict abounds). Ripe makes some sense here. Something that is "ripe with conflict" means there's a lot of conflict going on. Ripe fruit means it's really full and ready to eat. It doesn't completely make sense, but who says idioms have to? Well, idioms don't, but the proper saying (**Rife with conflict**) makes just a little more sense. You see, "rife" means: "plentiful" or "abundant". So something "rife with conflict" is abundant with conflict. Makes just a little more sense than "ripe".

Section Three: Publishing

Self publishing or looking for a publishing house, turning your story from a manuscript to an actual book can be a daunting process. Luckily you never have to go it alone.

Self, Vanity, Traditional Publishing

When it comes to publishing these days, there are more choices than ever in getting your book out to the world. For the most part, however, you can break publishing methods into Self, Vanity, or Traditional Publishing models. If you're a writer, you probably have some idea what these different things are, but if you don't, I'll give a short rundown.

Traditional Publishing is generally what people think of when someone talks about "getting published." Here, an author submits their manuscript (either by themselves or through an agent) to a publisher. If the publisher likes it, they offer the author a contract and then help the author edit, publish, and market their book.

Self Publishing is a more a recent trend in publishing, with the internet, social media, and cheap alternatives for getting a book out there, many authors have started cutting out looking for

an agent and/or publisher altogether and produce their books themselves (often through a platform such as Createspace or Lulu).

Vanity Publishing, also called "joint" or "subsidy" publishing, is a publisher who charges the author to get their book out there, either charging them up-front, or slipping a clause into the author's contract that stipulates they buy a certain number of books once published for "self-promotion" (If you get the question "How many copies of your book are you planning on buying" right up front from a publisher, that should be a red flag.)

Of the three, I fully support all but vanity publishers (if you're going to pay money up front to publish your book—something that should never happen in traditional publishing—just self publish. It will be most likely be cheaper and I, at least, find it infinitely more respectable). Self publishing, for the most part, still has a bit of a bad reputation, which I can understand with the number of unedited, semi-readable books that have made it out there without picky publishers acting as gatekeepers. Some self published novels, though, are wonderful (and a good number of the people who hire me to edit their books for them are planning on self-publishing). If you are willing to act as your own publisher (edit your book, do your own cover art, etc.) I see absolutely no problem with self publishing.

Between Traditional Publishing and Self Publishing, each platform comes with its own pros and cons. The trick is simply to decide how much work you are willing to put in on your own/how much money you're willing to put getting your book launched and how much control you want over your final product. You will never be asked for money from a traditional publisher (if you are, run) but since they are furnishing the cost of getting a book out, they have final say on edits/cover/etc. Self Publishing, it is up to you to put out a professional product, which can mean several hundred dollars out of pocket getting a book edited, laid out, and a cover designed.

Look into all your options before jumping headfirst into publishing. Just always stay away from vanity presses.

Shoot the Shaggy Dog

Like any industry, writers, editors, and publishers have their own lingo. While it helps save time when you know it, some people just starting out might not know exactly what a publisher means when they're sending out ARCs or what to do when an editor tells you to Lampshade something. So, for those just starting out:

1. CMS: Chicago Manual of Style, a style guide, also known as the editing bible for most publishers. Where newspapers use AP Style and academic periodicals tend to use APA, publishers ninety-nine percent of the time turn to CMS for all those tricky style questions.

2. ARC: Advance Review Copy, a copy of a book which is close to being released given to book reviewers and beta readers. Also called "galleys" ARCs might have typos the final proofreaders need to catch before the launch, but they allow reviewers time to read the book and have a review ready by the official release date.

3. Lampshade: Also known as "Lampshade Hanging", Lampshading is a writing device where the writer acknowledges that what they have just written might seem improbable enough to threaten a reader's suspension of disbelief. It serves the purpose of highlighting that the author knows that what just happened seems improbable and often is played for laughs (for example, in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* movie, Professor McGonagall asks, "Why is it that when something happens it is always you three?" Ron Weasley's answer: "Believe me Professor, I've been asking myself the same question for six years.")

4. Meta Data: Information about a book that helps it get to the right readers. Meta data includes the ISBN, keywords, publication date, etc.

5. As you know, Bob...: A form of exposition where a character is speaking of something for purely the reader's sake. This is often started with "As you know..." with the writer then using dialogue to explain things even though everyone else in the scene knows the information already. Due to its unnatural feeling, it is generally discouraged. It can, however, be lampshaded, for example (sticking to the *Harry Potter* theme) Voldemort in *A Very Potter Musical* stating "I know, I hear everything you hear!" when Professor Quirrell outlines exposition at the beginning of a scene.

6. Duology: The lesser known cousin of a trilogy—a series consisting of only 2 books, such as Tamora Pierce's *Trickster's Choice/Trickster's Queen* or Carol Berg's *The Lighthouse* duology.

7. POV: Point of View. Whether it's first person (I), third person (he/she), or little used second person (you), every book is written with a POV. The POV character is whose thoughts the reader follows. Poorly controlled POV in "third person limited" (where the narrator is a character in the story limited by their own personal knowledge) can lead to head jumping, so it is important to figure out who is relating the scene as a narrator, be it the "I" or a "He" character (if you've had me as an editor, you might be familiar with the note "POV slip" in a third-person novel)

8. Epistolary Novel: "Epistolary" meaning "written in a series of letters" an epistolary novel is

a novel which is written as though it is other written documents (be it letters, emails, texts, or anything else these days).

9. Foreword/Author's Note/Introduction/Prologue: Often all confused for each other, each means something a little different at the beginning of a novel. A Foreword is something generally written by another person about the novel/author (often written by people more famous than the author themselves or a mentor for academic works), an author's note is something that is written by the author that is at the beginning of a book, but not part of the story. An introduction is close to an author's note, but something generally written by the author about the book that is not part of the story in any way. A Prologue is part of the story that sometimes serves as a "chapter one" but takes place "outside" of the main story (either by happening years before the main story starts or with characters who are not part of the main group). Introduction and Prologue are perhaps the most commonly flipped leading to confusion between people in publishing and those not familiar with the terminology.

10. Shaggy Dog Story: A shaggy dog story is "a plot with a high level of build-up and complicating action, only to be resolved with an anti-climax or ironic reversal, usually one that makes the entire story meaningless." As TV Tropes explains, "The classic example is a man who bankrupts himself trying to return a shaggy dog to a rich family in

England for reward money -- when he finally makes it there, he's told that the dog "wasn't *that* shaggy" before the door's slammed in his face. The End." A shaggy dog story can be one-upped by becoming a "Shoot the Shaggy Dog" where not only has the story been meaningless, but the characters end up going to meaningless deaths for their trouble. *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* has been dubbed a "Shoot the Shaggy Dog" story where (spoilers) the main character, after spending the novel trying to break out of his dystopia, is beaten back down, scheduled for execution, and entirely content with it.

Submissions

How to Get Published

With a number of books coming out this year, what I have heard most (after 'congratulations') after telling people is, "How do you get published?"

So far I have refrained from the two-step answer:

- 1. Write a good book.*
- 2. Find someone who wants to publish it.*

Truly, that might be the simple answer, but I doubt it's what the people who ask the question want to hear. Sadly, it is the most honest answer. But, in the interest of actually giving people something more

substantial when asking about publishing, I'll try to offer a few more pointers.

- **Don't let rejections bother you.** Personally, I hate those statistics people throw around when trying to be encouraging about this. Stephan King was turned down by this many publishers, J.K. Rowling by this many... I don't keep my rejection letters like some of my writer friends do, I couldn't tell you how many times my books were rejected before someone wanted to publish them (more than a couple, less than a ton). I don't gain any sort of motivation from my rejections like it seems some people do, but rejection letters are a part of life as a writer—at least if you're not already a best seller. Some will be form "thanks but no thanks" some will be very nice and give words of encouragement, but rejections will come. Don't let them bother you. All you need is that one yes from the right person.

- **Nothing replaces a great manuscript.** Writing credits can help (have you published a novel before? great) but not having any isn't the end of the world. From my years working in acquisitions, I can completely honestly say that the manuscript is what is most important to selling your novel. Having a long line of previous credits and a Ph.D. is not going to make up for having a bad plot, flat writing, or three typos a paragraph. What *won't* help you in query letter is putting in things that are vaguely related as a way of trying to fill in credits you don't have. Writing "This is my first novel, but I have worked X years as a technical

writer" tells me that you probably have good spelling and grammar, but nothing else. "I live in Toronto with my husband and kids" likewise is just taking up valuable space in a one-page query.

- It's easier to get short stories published than novels. That said, if you feel better having something to put in that final paragraph of a query letter, you should probably focus on publishing short stories. They're cheaper than a Master's in Creative Writing, and easier to get published than a novel. I've never seen a reason to spend the money entering writing contests, but there are plenty of publishers who put out literary magazines and anthologies on a regular basis. As it costs them less, and it's less of a risk than backing you for a novel, you will generally find your short stories up against at least less scrutiny than any novel submissions. They are also a good way to get some money off your writing while trying to score that big novel deal. 1,000 word story isn't going to take you as long to write as a 100,000 word novel and—even if you don't make as much off it—you'll have enough money for a few cups of coffee and a professional writing credit to put to your name.

As unhelpful as that might be for any "insider" publishing secrets, I hope it helps shed some light into getting published.

But yeah. Two steps. Write good book. Find someone who thinks it's good.

Submissions 101

If you are intending to attempt traditional publishing rather than self publishing, one of the first things you will do once you have a fully edited novel is start querying. After your first few books, it starts becoming much less confusing, but looking at all those submission guidelines can be more than daunting when first starting out. So today I'll start with some general questions, and then go to a step-by-step of what you should do when ready to submit your novel to agents and/or publishers.

Q. I was told you need a literary agent to get published. Aren't you going to only submit to them?

A. It depends what you want to do. Literary agents (good literary agents) can be worth their weight in gold. They will help you with the business side of things, and are all but your only shot of having your book published by one of the "big name" publishers (Harper Collins, Penguin/Random House, etc.) For many small (or even mid-list) presses, however, you certainly don't need one. If submitting short stories, an agent would likely be overkill.

Q. All of these publishers/agents want a bio with previous writing/relevant experience. This is my first time writing. Am I sunk?

A. It's like the old job hunting problem, they only want to hire people with experience, but you can't get experience until you have a job. I think the vast majority of us have been there, and truly it's annoying as [expletive deleted]. After all, how are you supposed to get work experience if no one will hire you without it? When people start wanting to see a resume for your writing, it feels like to same thing (I have to have published something to get published...) The good news is, as a writer, all that truly matters is how good your work is. People like seeing a list of credits because it means you (most likely) aren't a bad writer. Someone else has vouched for you. If your writing is amazing, however, not having a page long list of credits isn't going to hurt you. A good book is a good book, no matter who's writing it.

Q. Is there a way I can be sure I'll be published?

A. Sure, self-publish—or pay a vanity press thousands to publish your book for you. Otherwise, I've said it before and I'll say it again, getting published is some combination of talent, perseverance, and luck. You have to write a book that someone else thinks is good (which is entirely subjective) while they are looking for new projects (a publisher may generally like your story, but their catalogue is full right now, so not worth sitting on it...) Really, it's about writing something interesting, and trying until the stars align for

traditional publishing. If you aren't going the self-publishing/vanity publishing route and someone is promising to get you published, be wary. They're probably selling something...or, you know, scamming.

Submissions Step-by-Step

Before you submit:

1. EDIT. First drafts generally have some big problems in them. You fix these during the editing stage. Even if your book is perfect from the get-go (was dictated by some higher power or what not) still go over it. Nothing is quite as off-putting as seeing a dozen typos per page when going through submissions. Either it means you aren't a very good writer (in which case, why keep reading?) or you don't care enough to actually fix your story up a little (in which case, a publisher generally won't want to work with you, since why should *they* put in the effort if you won't?) Put your best foot forward, which means editing until it's as perfect as you can make it.

2. Consider your goals. What are you looking for in publishing this work? Is it a short story you wrote to just try to get some writing credits? In that case, you still want a reputable publisher, but you don't have to limit yourself t' the top name publishers with giant paychecks. A nice college review would be a great place to look. Do you want your novel published by one of the big names and seen on

every bookshelf in the country? You're probably best off trying for an agent. Do you just want your novel published professionally and to see some royalties? Small presses might not be a bad idea. It's all about what you want from your work. There's no right or wrong answer, just different goals.

3. Do your research. Sadly, with as many want-to-be authors out there writing for the first time, dying to see their books published, there are some disreputable "publishers" out there willing to take advantage. Before submitting somewhere that isn't well known (not a big name or, perhaps, a university press) try looking at Preditors and Editors, Absolute Write Water Cooler, or even just google [Press you're interested in] scam, an' you should get any complaints that might be.

4. Put together a list of agents/presses you are interested in. Once you figure out your goals and know these presses aren't scams, decided whom you're going to query. Also check if they allow simultaneous submissions (submitting to more than one agent/publisher at the same time). It's good to stay organized s' you don't get into problems later 'n (including submitting twice, or even three times, to the same publisher...I've seen it happen as a slush pile reader).

What you will need to submit:

Submission guidelines vary from agent to agent (and publisher to publisher) so always be sure to read guidelines on a site before submitting, but in general, you will need:

- **A complete, fully edited manuscript.** Non-fiction authors may find that they can get a publishing contract with just a book proposal, but I have yet to find an agent or publisher who is willing to take fiction (from non-established authors) without the author having the manuscript completely finished. For Short Stories, you probably will be submitting the full manuscript from the start. For novels, you will generally be submitting the first three (or so) chapters with the initial submission. This does not, however, mean you should only have three chapters edited. It may say on their website you won't hear back from an initial query for four to six weeks, but always be ready to send a full manuscript the next day, just in case.

- **A query letter**, basically, your book's cover letter. It will generally include a "hook", a short blurb about your book, and a bio/why you are the person to write the book (it's okay to skimp on the bio if you don't have any other writing credits. It's worse to try to fill it 'n with unhelpful information than leave it blank altogether).

- **A synopsis.** A summary of the full story, from beginning to end. You generally won't need this for short stories (they have the full story, after all) but

since you tend to only send in a bit of your novel as a sample, this lets the acquisitions editor know if they're interested in how the story turns out. Do *not* try to leave it with a cliff hanger ("leave them wanting more") "outline (in about one single-spaced page unless directed otherwise) how your characters go from point A to point B and finally end up at point C at the end.

- Self-Addressed Stamped Envelope (SASE).

This only comes in to play if you're mailing in your submission rather than emailing it (some publishers insist one form or the other, but more and more are turning to email-only submissions, in my experience). Still, you may see requests for a SASE on submission guidelines. This is so that the agent/publisher is able to mail you a response simply by sticking it in the envelope you sent and mailing it back to you.

- Anything else the press/agent asks for in their submission guidelines. The above things will cover most places' submissions guidelines, but some will want you to have written a cover blurb (what would be on the back of your book while it's sitting on the shelf) a separate author bio (generally what would likewise be on your book [Jessica Dall is the author of... etc.]) a breakdown of whom you are targeting with this book (children, stay-at-home moms, murder-mystery enthusiasts, etc.) or other things of those nature. Don't give out sensitive information (bank account info, Social Security

Numbers, anything that feels scammy) but be ready for extra requests from some agents/presses.

Putting together your submission:

1. Read the full submission guidelines of the agent/publisher you are querying. Make sure they are currently accepting submissions (some agents/publishers have closed and open submission periods), and make sure you have exactly what they want (Query, Synopsis, First Three Chapters? Just Query? Query and Full Manuscript? Query, Synopsis, First Two Chapters, Marketing Plan, Author Bio, Back-Cover Blurb?)

2. Put together your submission. If you are mailing it in, put everything requested in a manila envelope. If emailing (and there are no guidelines as to attachments) it is generally best to have your query letter in the body of the email, and then attach the synopsis and first three chapters in an easy-to-open file format (generally .doc/.docx or .rtf work best). If there are no guidelines as to titling the files, it is generally best to structure them with all the important information up front, for example: LastName.PartofSubmission.Title (e.g. Dall.Synopsis.TheCopperWitch). Again, be sure to check guidelines about attachments and file names, some agents/publishers are highly specific.

3. Proofread your query letter a final time. It's just as bad (if not worse) to have typos in your query letter as it is to have typos in your

manuscript. You want to come off as a good writer at all stages of your submission.

4. Mail/Send your submission to the agent/publisher's preferred mailing/email address. Once you're sure you're ready to go, say a little prayer and send your query off into the world.

What Happens Next?

1. Wait. It's possible for Agents and publishers to get hundreds of submissions daily. It's possible you'll hear back the next day, or even the same day, if you just happen to send something in while they're reading submissions, but it's just as likely you won't hear back for weeks (or months). Don't try to read meaning into it, it's just how long it can take to work through a backlog of submissions.

2. Hear back (maybe...) As much as rejections aren't fun, it's better than on' alternative—not hearing back at all. While some agents/publishers are really good about getting back to everyone who submits to them, some you won't hear back from unless they're interested in seeing more/publishing you.

If you receive a rejection letter:

1. Brush it off. Yeah, rejection always sucks, but it's part of being an author. Perhaps they'll let you know why they weren't interested, more than likely it will just be a form "due to the high number of

submissions we receive, we must be highly selective... blah blah blah. We don't feel this project is right for us at this time." It's possible you were rejected because your novel reads like something a second grader would do, but it's far more likely they don't feel the genre's really right for them, they think it could use a little more editing, or simply their catalogue is full and they aren't looking for anything more for the time being.

2. Move on to the next batch of submissions.

If you're querying one at a time (by choice, or if you are submitting to people who don't accept simultaneous submissions), go to the next name on your list and prepare your submission following their guidelines. If you're querying in groups, pick the next few submissions you're going to send off and send those.

3. Repeat until you get something other than a rejection.

If you don't hear back:

Like I said, it can take forever to hear back from some agents/publishers for a number of reasons, but at some point it can be fair to assume you aren't going to hear back. There are no hard and fast rules as to when to give up, but:

1. If the publisher has time estimates (you should hear back in four to six weeks, three months, etc.) feel free to follow up at the *end* of that

estimate. For example, if it says four to six weeks for the initial query, and it's been six weeks, feel free to write a quick "I emailed this query six weeks ago, I just wanted to make sure you had it" email. Hopefully they're still working on it. If you still don't hear anything in the next week or so, start feeling free to move on.

2. If there's no time estimate as to when you'll hear back, give the acquisitions editor six to eight weeks, roughly, before writing them off. You may still hear from a long-lost submission much later on, but if eight weeks have passed and you still have no answer, personally I find it safe to assume you won't be hearing from that agent/publisher.

3. Submit to the next batch of agents/publishers. Once again, you keep going until you get something other than a rejection or no response.

You get a "we'd like to see more" letter.

1. First, be happy. Speaking from experience, at least ninety-five percent of stories/novels (sent to reputable publishers) don't even get this far in the submissions process. Getting a "please send us more" letter means that you have a story interesting enough that someone wants to read it. You aren't getting published yet, but it's definitely something to be proud of.

2. Follow the guidelines sent to you in the letter or email to submit additional materials. Generally this is going to be the rest of your novel (if you only submitted a sample) but they may ask for other things as well. Make sure to follow their guidelines exactly (what file format, where to send it, what to include) and send off anything else they want as quickly as possible (if you keep them waiting around for a month after they request a full manuscript, you may have lost your chance. It's possible they've signed someone else and their catalogue/client list is now full).

3. Wait. Yes, more waiting. And for possibly longer this time. It takes more time reading and judging a full novel than it does a submission for the most part. You also should *not* be sending out more queries/submissions at this point. It is good manners to wait to hear back from someone reading your full novel rather than keep submitting to others. If you don't hear back for a while, feel free to follow up. As "fulls" (full manuscripts) are requested from fewer authors, it's general practice that you will hear one way or the other about the agent/publisher's decision.

You get a "We liked the submission, but we aren't actually going to publish you after reading the full" letter.

1. Be bummed, but brush it off. It happens. When you're trying to make it from the five percent who get fulls requested to the one percent that gets

published, sometimes you end up in the four percent. It's a letdown, but think of it positively. Someone liked you enough to put you in the top five percent. Hopefully you'll find someone else who likes it just that little bit extra next time. All signs are pointing positive.

2. Go back and start submitting to the new batch of agents/publishers. If you run out of your first list, do some more research and look for more reputable agents/publishers to submit to. Otherwise move to the next on your list.

You get a "We want to publish you" letter:

This can come either right after the initial submission (generally will for short stories, or can possibly happen if you send in your full manuscript to start with), or it can come after submitting a full manuscript. Either way, it is certainly the best type of letter.

1. Be happy. Jump up and down if you're the type. Smile. Pat yourself on the back. You've made it to the one percent (and not the one percent that will have Occupy Wall Street after you). It's a big accomplishment. *However*, don't write back/call everyone you know until you've calmed down and done the next few steps.

2. Ask to review the contract. This is why you want to calm down some before responding/telling everyone. Publishing is a business. You need to

protect your interests. Perhaps where you submitted didn't come up with any scam reports, but there's something fishy when you look at the contract. Read it fully, ask questions, and if you can't work it out, walk away. Yes, it's painful after all the submitting and work you've done to get this far, but it's a bad idea to sign the first thing people put in front of you just because you want to be published. Make sure you maintain the rights of your work, that you aren't paying for anything (you don't pay agents or publishers' they get paid when they sell your book), and the contract terms are favorable. If it's your first time looking at a publishing/agent contract, perhaps try to talk someone who might know what to look for. Publishing contracts, like any contract, are *legally binding*. You don't want to hurt yourself before you even get your book out.

3. Negotiate. Even if you aren't planning on walking away from the contract, you can always feel free to try to negotiate. Agents/Publishers do tend to have the upper hand (if they don't publish you, there are another hundred people happy to take your place) so don't be demanding/outrageous 'I demand a one million book initial run with seventy-five percent royalties!) but you certainly don't have to be a pushover. Really, if you're being reasonable, the worst they can say is no. If the publisher/agent likes your book enough to want to print it/represent it, they'll probably be willing to work with you a little on contract terms. If they aren't just decide if it's

something you can live with, or if it's worth trying to find someone else.

4. Sign the contract. Once you have a contract with any changes you've agreed upon, sign it and send it off to the agent/publisher. Some groups will accept electronic signatures/scanned signatures. Some want a hard copy/ink signature. The bigger the project, the more likely you're going to be sending a signed contract in the mail. In that case, the publisher/agent should then likewise sign the contract and send a copy back to you.

5. Celebrate. *Now* comes the time when you call all your friends and family, taunt those who belittled your writing, whatever you plan on doing to celebrate. You'll have edits, and covers, and who knows what else in the next few months in preparation of your book launch, but for now, enjoy it. It's an accomplishment.

Wishlists and Trends

Last week, agents (and publishers) from all over posted to Twitter with types of stories they were currently looking for using the hashtag “#MSWL” (Manuscript **W**ishlist). A great (and very helpful) idea to help authors try to connect with agents/publishers who might be interested in the type of story they had written, it also turned out to

be rather disheartening for authors who scrolled through not finding a single agent looking for anything like their novels. Some accounts even went so far as to post things along the lines of, “I’m swamped with X, NO MORE STORIES WITH X.”

Pretty much there’s no way to react to that other than, “Ouch, harsh.”

So what do you do if you’re grouped in with the great “X” no agent seems to want? Scrap the novel you spent however long on and start on something it seems agents actually want? No and no.

The first thing all authors have to remember is publishing is a business. Our novels are our babies. Publishers, however, sadly don’t look at manuscripts with an eye toward what they think the world *should* read; they look at manuscripts trying to find something that will make them money. If that means thirty-thousand vampire novels or the same generic love story over and over again, that’s what they are going to pick up. Since agents only get paid when they sell your story to a publisher (or at least *should* only get paid when they sell your manuscript, if not get a new agent) they need to look for things they think publishers will think are going to sell. This is not to say publishers are some faceless, greedy, corrupt organizations—most people get into publishing because they love books—it’s simply if they can’t sell what they publish, everyone’s paycheck is going to bounce and they’ll soon be out of a job.

And so agents/publishers often end up buying on trends. A couple years back vampires were hot. Then dystopias. Judging on new books I know are coming out/what many agents seemed to mention in #MSWL, time travel is the next thing on the rise (as far as fantasy goes). Obviously these aren't the only kind of stories that will be published during the life of the trend, but if they are what publishers are finding sell, they're going to be easier to get published.

So you should set your other novel aside and get to work on a time travel novel, right?

Again...no. The tricky thing with trends is that they're fleeting. They don't all last the same amount of time, but each one always hits a point where it starts dying off and publishers stop buying them as much (if at all, depending on how saturated the market gets). And publishing takes time. First you have to write the book. Then you have to edit it. Then you have to make sure it's polished. Then you have to submit it. An agent might take a couple of months to get back to you and ask for a full manuscript. Then they might take another month to let you know if they decide to take it. Then they may want to work with you to polish it even more. Even if you get through all of this and get to start shopping your manuscript while still at the height of a trend...you're already too late. It's taken you several months at this point *after* however long it took you to write the darn book in the first place,

and it will take likely another year for it to come out (the publisher will send it through several rounds of edits, it has to go to layout, a cover has to be designed, you have to pre-market...publishing is a slow, slow beast). If publishers only start looking at your manuscript at the peak of the trend, they will probably assume the trend will be dying by the time your book gets out, and will be just as likely to pass on it as any other book at that point. Following the trend hasn't given you quite the edge you were looking for.

So the only way to capitalize on a trend is to already have a completed book ready to shop when a trend hits. And since there's no way to know *when* a trend is going to hit, what good does that do you? It just seems like dumb luck whether or not you have written a book that ends up being "on trend".

And yes, yes it is. Like much else in publishing, hitting a trend or not is mostly just a matter of being in the right place at the right time.

So why even bring this up? Just to be more depressing?

No, to make the simple point: **Don't force yourself to write a story just because it fits whatever's big at the moment.** Maybe you *want* to write a time travel story. Great, then go for it. If it's a plot that interests you, you might do something amazing with it. If you're only trying to

capitalize on a trend, however, you're likely to be disappointed. You forced yourself to write something you only sort of wanted just because it would sell—and now no one wants it because you're too late to the party. Trying to find an agent and publisher can be frustrating enough as it is. No need to add to that frustration by making yourself miserable during the fun part (actually writing the thing).

And so, I think a tip posted earlier today on Twitter fits the moral of the story perfectly: *“Don't worry about what the world considers the perfect novel. Write your perfect novel, and let the world come to you.”*

Who knows? Maybe by the time you're finished, you just might catch the next trend.

Word Counts

Word Limits

Today's post: Word Limits or: Why won't they publish my 300,000 word novel?

People write some *long* novels. James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* is 145,469 words long. Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* is 311,596. And, of course, as the king of long novels, Leo

Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is 587,287. With most novels clocking in around 100,000 words (give or take 20,000), Tolstoy has arguably written six books in one, and Rand a one-book trilogy (as the shorter of her two most famous works).

However, while longer books exist, they also come up against more problems when looking for a publisher. So what is there to be done when how long (or short) your novel is seems to be what's keeping it from being published? Aren't the word counts they give generally arbitrary anyway?

As one NaNoWriMo Forum poster puts it: *"I've read somewhere that 120 K is the upper limit for a new fantasy writer, which seems really... short for a fantasy novel...I still can't believe it's set as the upper limit."*

Now, first, I'd like to say I've never found 120,000 words short. My fantasy novels tend to be around 80,000, but perhaps that's because I don't write Tolkien-style epics.

Second, as the earlier books I've listed in this blog show, it's possible to get a book published that is more than 120,000 words. You should never say "can't" when it comes to publishing. Doing certain things can make it *harder* to get published, but nothing I have yet seen makes it impossible to get a book published outside of not having a book written in the first place.

But why do publishers even care about word counts? Sure, if the story drags on and on, that's a problem, but if it's action-packed and engaging for those 200,000 words, what's the problem?

Because **writing is business to a publisher**, and certain word counts are used to mitigate risk and maximize profits. Beyond the fact that it's likely many long manuscripts could do with a harsh paring down, there are two big problems with books over 120,000-150,000 words:

- 5. The longer the book is, the more expensive it is to produce.** Unless you are going through a vanity publisher (and thus paying the press to put your book out) the general rule is money flows to the author, not from. A reputable publisher will pay for formatting, cover art, editing...and just about every other "start-up" cost there is to putting out a book. Therefore, the longer your book is, the more they're going to end up paying their editors. After all, there's a reason I charge more editing a 200,000-word book than a 10,000-word one. The longer the book is, the longer it will take to edit. Especially edit *well*. If you're paying an editor per project, you're going to be paying for them more for a long project. If you're paying an editor hourly, they're going to have to take much more time to edit a long book. Even if you're paying an editor a set salary, they may only be able to get one book done

when they generally would have three ready to go if they're stuck on a long project. Since most publishers have at least three rounds of edits with three different editors (a content editor, a line editor, and a copyeditor and/or proofreader), that can add up to a lot of extra man-hours.

And then, of course, there's just the production cost in general. With eBooks it's changing a little, but as long as print books are popular, the longer a book is the more it will cost to print (ink, paper, etc.) Printing an initial run of 1,000 300,000-word books basically uses the same amount of supplies as 3,000 100,000-word books.

2. The longer a book is, the harder it is to sell. Now, this isn't a "people don't like reading long books" point. Obviously people are willing to read books that are longer than "average". Going back to the fact that the larger a (print) book is, the more paper is needed to print it—the more paper in a book means the more it will cost to ship, and the more shelf space it takes up. Most bookstores prefer to have a range of books out, and thus don't like taking many thick books, especially ones by unknown authors.

Likewise, with shipping and printing costs quite a bit higher for long books versus short ones, to make money off longer books they need to be priced higher. Now, not only do you have to sell the story to someone (since not all plots are loved by all

people) but you have to find someone who is willing to foot the cost of all that extra time and material. Someone who's willing to pay for a book at \$14.99 might not be so willing to buy it at \$24.99. There's a psychology to marketing, and how you're able to price things is a big part of that.

Add the fact that you have fewer books in general to sell in one run to the fewer buyers, and publishers see a lot of warning lights going off.

With the growing popularity of eBooks, perhaps the word count barriers will start to come down. The cost of pixels doesn't go up with how long a book is. Even if you can't decrease editing costs, you at least would be able to save money on printing and be able to price a long book close to a shorter book. But, for now, limits on length when it comes to submissions make complete sense to me.

And so, with the surplus of manuscripts floating around out there, publishers can be picky about where they spend their time and money. While anything can happen based on whose desk a manuscript comes across, things that pose a financial risk (too long a book, an unknown author, a plot that doesn't quite seem to fit any one genre) are often looked at critically.

After all, a book is art to an author, but business to a publisher.

Copyrights and Contracts

Contracts

There are a couple of reasons literary agents are still a go-to force in publishing—and not only because they tend to be the gatekeepers to large publishing houses. Beyond helping get you a publishing deal, agents can help you negotiate a contract once you have a deal.

Of course you don't always have to get an agent to get a book published, and there are some good things about going agent-less (namely, not having to give an agent a cut of your earnings) but then, what are you going to do about the contract? After all, a bad contract can seriously hurt you in the future.

Many people I know of suggest going to a lawyer to look over a contract. Of course you can always do that, but at least for me, I don't find that necessary (I never have/I don't know anyone who has personally). Of course I am not a lawyer, and this is not legal advice, but from my personal experience, it's possible to keep from getting into a bad situation by just fully reading your contract and having a good head on your shoulders.

As someone with experience on both sides of publishing contracts, here are a few tips I would give authors going it alone.

5) Unless you chose to work with a vanity publisher, never sign a contract that says you will pay the publisher for services. Be it editing services, start-up costs, or anything else, legitimate publishers *won't ask for you to pay to have your book published.* The general rule you can keep in mind is: Money flows to the author. Not from. Publishers make their money by selling your book. Big or small, traditional publishers won't make you pay for them to edit, layout, get a cover artist, or market your book. They also won't require you to purchase a set number of books. There are a few “back-end” vanity publishers out there that fly under the radar of fledgling authors by not asking for money up front but asking questions like “How many books are you planning on buying?” with the intent of putting a nonstandard clause in a contract requiring the author to buy at least seventy-five (if not more) copies of their book once it's published. They don't ask for fees, but they're making their money by having at least that many sales and making it the author's duty to sell those copies under the guise of “normal author promotion”. Yes, authors can buy their own book (generally at a sharp discount from the publisher) but

they won't require you to buy a certain amount of copies to agree to publish you, much less write it in to your contract.

2) Don't jump at just any contract. You've gotten lord knows how many rejections, and *finally* you've gotten a yes! That's always an exciting feeling, but especially if it's your first sale. One of the biggest mistakes you can make, however is to sign that contract and send it straight back. As with any contract *read it thoroughly*. Maybe you've found a less-than-honest publisher that has some nonstandard clause in it that will strip you of your rights. You won't know if you don't read it.

Furthermore, even if the contract is completely legitimate, you might find something you want to negotiate. Negotiating is something your agent would do normally, but if you are selling your book yourself, you are your own agent, so it's up to you to negotiate any points in your contract you are unhappy with. You don't want to be difficult or argumentative, but if you feel there's something you'd like to discuss before signing *bring it up*. By myself, I have negotiated e-book/print releases and higher royalties. Just because you aren't a professional agent doesn't mean you should let a publisher do whatever they want without question.

3) Know what you want. Maybe you just want to get your book out there. It doesn't really matter who publishes it, or how much you make. If you are happy going with an untested publisher, or are fine

with only having someone produce an e-book, that's fine. Everyone wants something different from publisher. If you aren't happy with a contract, however, and they won't negotiate, you don't have to settle. Know what you're willing to take for your work, and if one offer isn't that, you can always walk away and look for another publisher.

4) Never sign away your rights. A publisher may help you with registering your book with the U.S. Copyright office, but your contract should never sign over artistic rights of your book (unless you were specifically hired as a ghost writer). Publishers are contracting the right to exclusively distribute your book, not buying the copyright to it. The book will stay in your name, and once the contract period is up (generally a few years) the book is once again yours to do with what you wish. You can re-contract it with the same publisher (if they wish to as well) or you can move to someone else. They don't own your book. Likewise, do not sign over movie rights, audiobook rights, or anything similar. If you see a clause like that, you're likely not dealing with a legitimate publisher.

5) If something seems fishy, ask someone before signing. Never discount gut instinct when reading a contract. If something doesn't seem right to you, it very well might not be. In that case, you can always look for some outside help. Search the publisher online. There are some great sites like Writers Beware, Predators and Editors, and Absolute Write Water Cooler that talk about known

scam publishers. Likewise, you can also often find known scam publishers by typing in the publisher's name followed by "scam" in a search engine (e.g. Weird Contact Publishers Scam). You can also ask others who might be a little more well-versed in publishing than you are, or, of course, consult a lawyer.

Novel Blogs

First things first, I think blogs are awesome. Sure there are inane blogs out there, and they are the subject of some ridicule, but there are also hundreds of great blogs out there. I fully support anyone interested in keeping up a blog—especially if they have something interesting to say.

But that leads me to today's post: Novel Blogs.

Writers of all kinds keep blogs. They can be portfolios for ghostwriters, writing and publishing tips (like mine), updates on publicity tours, or any number of other things. One popular type of blog for some writers is to set up a blog for their work in progress (WIP) where they post a chapter up at a time.

Now, depending on what your final goals are for your writing, these types of blogs can be a good or a bad thing.

On the plus side, a novel blog can get you some outside critiques, get your name up on the web as a writer, and—if you're lucky—get you some publicity.

Negatively, however, these novel blogs can also seriously hurt your chances at traditional publishing in the future—at least for that particular WIP.

Having been in the middle of many arguments about this topic, I know there are some varying opinions on this topic (most of which hinge on how self-publishing is changing the publishing industry) but the long and short of it is:

When you sell your manuscript to a publisher (a reputable publisher) you aren't selling the work or copyright. You are selling them the *rights to publish* your work. When you sign the contract with your publisher, you aren't saying they own your novel (at least you shouldn't be) you're saying they can produce and sell it for you.

Almost always, the rights you are selling are exclusive (that only that publisher may sell the book for however long the contract states), and more often than not, publishers are looking to contract First Publication Rights, that is, the right to be the first people to put your book out there.

As one blogger puts it: *"The instant that you first publish your work you've used up your first publication rights... This is true no matter how that publication is achieved: whether you publish through one of the big conglomerates like Random House, a tiny independent like Salt or Bluechrome (which are growing in stature and reputation every day), whether you self-publish or get to market through one of the many murky vanity presses which lurk on the periphery of the industry: your book has been published and those first rights are irretrievably gone. "*

That blogger is pointing out how important looking into your publisher is, but what s/he doesn't say is that self publishing isn't solely what happens when you go through some company and ready your book for sale online. Most publishers go off the simpler definition of "publish", that is: *"to disseminate to the public."* So, it doesn't matter if your work is in book form, an e-book, or if you're even getting paid for it. **If your work is available in its entirety to the public, in print or online, many publishers consider your work "published" and your first rights used.** If the publisher you are hoping to work with only considers buying first publication rights, having your book online can make them pass on it—even if you only "published" the book on a blog.

Now, this is where that controversy I was talking about earlier comes in. While I never suggest people

post works they want to publish traditionally online, some people like to point out that a few authors have been picked up by big publishing houses *because* of their popularity online.

It's possible; I won't say that it isn't. There are cases where "self-published" works online become such hits that they are picked up by big name companies. Cases like that may become even more common in the future. For now, though, at least in my opinion, chances of getting noticed as an internet sensation fall into the realm of possibility, but not probability. And so, for now, it is always my suggestion that authors think before posting WIPs online:

1. Are you planning on trying to traditionally publish this WIP once you are done with it?

If so, consider keeping it offline, or only publish an excerpt. Publishing a scene or a chapter of your current WIP on your blog won't use your first publication rights the way posting the entire work will.

And more importantly:

2. Why do you want to post this WIP? Are you just looking for outside critiques? It's possible to have people read your work without having it considered "published". After all, the important part of the earlier definition of "publish" is the word "public". If it isn't possible for anyone to come across it and read it (such as you have a password to get to your site, are on a members-only site, or are

just emailing the manuscript around to a few people) you have not "published" your work as you would have on a blog that is available to the world. Are you hoping to catch someone's attention with it? Then put up an excerpt that you're especially proud of. There are plenty of ways to do what you want without throwing an obstacle in your path later on.

Of course, if you just want to get your work out there and don't especially want to publish traditionally, don't worry about your novel blog. It's just important to always think before you act as a writer—especially on the internet.

Toe Tappin' Copyrights

While bumming around the internet, recently, I came across review of my book, *The Bleeding Crowd*, on "Books? Yes Please!" While it's always nice to find good reviews for your work (good always feels better than bad, after all) what really struck me reading it was the reviewer's comment that two main characters' relationship in the story reminding her of song lyrics. Besides getting the song stuck in my head after looking it up (say what you will about Taylor Swift, but some of her songs are darn catchy) the comment got me thinking about the inspiration songs can have on writing.

I've mentioned before how song lyrics can make for good writing prompts, and I fully admit I have taken inspiration from songs before for my writing. If a song or its lyrics inspires someone to write, I fully support writers running with it.

As long as you don't run afoul of copyright law.

Copyrights, as most things buried in legalese, are not the easiest things to understand at first glance. What's public domain, what's allowed under "fair use"...as writers we have to both love them for protecting our work and curse them for keeping us from using a line of another work that explains a scene *perfectly*.

While all modern creative works tend to fall under some sort of copyright (which means using anybody else's words from a work after the early 1920's can get you in legal hot water) song lyrics can be a special sort of mine field. While sometimes you can get away with using a small percentage of something as "fair use", songs tend to be so short even a line or two might put you into enforceable copyright territory—and record labels are notorious for litigating anything they think is close to infringement.

For this reason, the most common advice you'll get about using song lyrics in your writing is simply **don't**.

Now, anyone who has read fan fiction sites might be familiar with "song fics" (stories that are built around/interspersed with transcribed song lyrics the author feels captures the scene they are writing). While these might be a staple of the fan fiction community, publishing any of these scenes with the intent to sell them would be a legal nightmare (and not just because fan fiction tends to use other writer's characters, which is also a copyright no-no). Since most fan fiction is written for the enjoyment of other fans/are posted with no intent for the writer to make money off their story, fan fiction as a whole tends to fly under the radar of people who might otherwise start suing. Once that story you wrote about Percy Jackson dancing with Sailor Moon to Taylor Swift's "The Way I Loved You" starts hitting the presses to sell, the legal departments of those publishers/studios/labels start whirring to life. And that is a fight no writer really wants to get into.

So what are your choices if you want to have your characters listen to a popular song in your story?

1. Mention it by title and move on.

While the lyrics of a song can be (and most often are) copyrighted, titles cannot (otherwise how could you have multiple books/songs sharing the same title?) You are more than free to write a scene which includes, "Joe turned on the radio and Tool's 'Lateralus' came blasting over the speakers." Or, "Sam groaned, this had to be the third time the club

had played 'Blurred Lines' already tonight." Mentioning the song titles and moving on allows you to attach a song you want to your writing while staying on the non-sue-able side of publishing.

2. Get permission from the artist/studio.

If you really want to use the actual lyrics for a song, rather than just mentioning it by name, you can also write to whoever owns the copyright for a song and respectfully request permission to use the lyrics in a book you are writing. Sometimes you may get lucky and they'll say "sure, go for it" but even to get a "yes" it's recommended you give yourself four to six months advance time to get everything sorted away before trying to publish. You also have to accept you might also get a "sure, but pay us \$X for using it" or just a straight "no" when you contact them—meaning you'll need to write that part out before you publish all the same.

Note: Just attributing the lyrics to someone as you would a quote in a school essay does not mean you don't also need permission to use the lyrics in the first place. Citing≠/≠permission.

3. Tempt fate.

So you want to use the lyrics, but don't want to waste the time asking for permission. You can always go ahead and tempt fate and see if you get away with it (but really **DON'T**, it's not worth it).

4. Just don't.

Does your story really, really, really need those lyrics in it to be perfect? Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, probably not. In fact, naming a certain song/using a specific song in a scene will tend to only date your story. Unless you want your story to specifically be "[State] in 2007", don't have your characters listening to "Fergalicious" at a club. Songs rise and fall so quickly that what is extremely hot one year will drop off and become "oh yeah, that song" soon enough. If you're going for a generic "present day" time period for your story, naming specific songs is a bad idea. If you are writing a certain year, but don't have a character really in to pop culture, naming a song is generally unnecessary. Leave your characters at listening to "[genre] music" and use the specific song that inspired you as just that—inspiration.

Layout

Novel Layout Tips

I will be the first to admit that I am not generally a layout person. I do have some experience with it, but I'm an editor, not a designer.

We all have our specialties, it's to be expected. Being a good editor doesn't necessarily mean you're

a good writer, and being a good writer definitely doesn't mean that you're good at graphic design. As more and more people go the self-publishing route, however, it's falling on authors to do their own formatting (at least if they aren't going to pay for someone else to do it, which is sometimes advisable). As an editor, a lot of my work comes from people planning to self publish. There are likewise freelance designers out there who can help get a book up to professional quality without a publisher and their in-house designers. If you've decided to strike out on your own, please keep a few things in mind that even I, with my limited layout experience find annoying in self-published novels.

1. Indents and margins. Luckily for self layer-outers, the combination of publishing platform uploaders and many word processing programs saving to PDF make it simpler than ever to turn a manuscript written in Microsoft Word (or the like) into book format. It's important to realize, though, that traditional manuscript format (8.5"x11" pages, double spaced, 1" margins, 0.5" indents, 12-point Times New Roman font) does not magically become book format just by changing the page size. Most people realize without being told that books aren't often double spaced, but what people seem to often miss is that indents and margins that seem normal on a 8.5"x11" page suddenly are giant when something's 6"x9". One of the simplest ways of pointing out a book is self-published (or published by people who aren't used to doing layout) is by looking at the formatting. Indents of 0.5" rather

than 0.3" make it seem like someone shrunk Word pages rather than formatted a book. Likewise, margins should be made smaller on a 6"x9" page. Just think about it. 1" margins on each side of an 8.5"x11" paper leaves you with 6.5" of writing space across. On a 6"x9" page, that's only 4". Everything should shrink in proportion.

2. Chapters start on new pages. When writing in manuscript format, it doesn't always matter if you do a page break or not at the start of a new chapter. In book format, however, each chapter should be on its own page. This can be done simply by just inserting a page break in the document you are using, or you can be a little fancier and have a chapter start slightly down the page from normal. If doing the second, make sure that you use the ruler function on the side of a Word document so all the chapter headings line up on the same part of the page.

3. Scene breaks. When typing in manuscript format, you generally are expected to use some set of markings between scenes (most commonly it is either *** or #). These marks (especially the hash mark) arose as a way to tell typesetters there should be an empty line there as a scene break. While most books just use a "hard break" (an empty line before the next paragraph) for a scene break, using a hard break in a manuscript would make it possible for a typesetter to miss a scene break should it be pushed to the bottom or top of the page. When laying out your own book, however, this shouldn't be an issue.

Get rid of these "scene break" marks for a more professional look.

4. Font choice. Some typesetters have a strong dislike of Times New Roman (feel it looks amateurish) but for someone who isn't a designer, I truly have no problem with it. The larger point is to use a "professional" font that is serif. After that, Times New Roman, Georgia, or Garamond–I, at least, couldn't tell you the difference.

5. Text alignment. While typing in manuscript format, left text-alignment is generally the best so you don't have any strange gaps between words while writing. When laying a story out as a book, however, justified is the gold standard. If you look in most published books, text is justified to give it a more formal, professional look. Doing so with your own book will lend your layout more credibility.

There are a million other little things that a professional typesetter would be able to tell you about layout that I'm sure I'm missing, but if you take care of these five things, I likely wouldn't notice it—which at least gives your book a leg up when it comes to first impressions.

About the Author

Jessica finished her first novel at the age of finished and she hasn't stopped writing ever since. In the past few years she has published such novels as:

- The *Broken Line* Series:
 - *Book 1: The Copper Witch*
 - *Book 2: The Porcelain Child*
 - *Book 3: The Paper Masque*
- *Between the Lines*
- *The Bleeding Crowd*
- *Grey Areas*

While in college, she worked as an intern at a small press, quickly rising through the ranks to Acquisitions Editor, where she remained until they unfortunately shut their doors in 2011. Since that time, she has been working both as a freelancer and as a content editor for a number of small presses.

In 2012, Jessica also added Book Reviewer and Creative Writing Teacher to her long list of literary pursuits, writing reviews for ePublishaBook.com and teaching creative writing to children and teens in Washington, DC.

Her full blog on writing, editing, and publishing can be found at jessicadall.com