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# Top Ten Errors Writers Make

A Writers Digest Tutorial



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## Introduction

Welcome to *Top Ten Errors Writers Make: What are they and how do I fix them?* My name is Helga Schier. I am a literary editor with more than 20 years of experience in the publishing industry. After many years as editor in Big Five publishing houses, I founded [withpenandpaper.com](http://withpenandpaper.com) and now provide independent editorial services, guiding writers like you through the development and writing process to help you write the best book you possibly can.

Today I'll be talking about the President chewing gum, about a couple celebrating their anniversary, about a mother defending her child tooth and nail, about black cats on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, about clothes all over the living room, and dishes crashing to the floor in a restaurant.

But if this was a novel and not a tutorial, I should not tell you what I'll be talking about, I should just do it. In other words, I should *show, not tell*. And of course, I'll be talking about that, too. But what I'm trying to do here—foreshadow elements of my tutorial in the beginning—is a fine strategy, because as a fiction writer you want the beginning of your story to tie in with your ending. Your story should run like an unstoppable freight train of events—one plot twist leading to the next, together weaving Charlotte's web, spelling the words 'good book,' or rather 'good first draft.' For that's what it is: a draft. Even when *you* think it's ready for an agent or a publisher. Everyone else involved will have comments, and you'll be revising more often than you'd like, because even a near-perfect manuscript is bound to have typos.

But seriously. Nothing is worse than reading a manuscript that has not been properly edited and proofread. Editors want you to succeed. I get excited every time a new manuscript lands on my desk. I am excited by the idea the writer pitched to me. Ideas, great ideas, unique ideas are the beginning of every great book. But ideas are cheap. It's the execution that matters; the execution will decide whether your manuscript ends up in the slush pile or on the shelves of a bookstore. In other words, the way you develop your idea or bring it to life will not only hook, but also *reel in* agents and editors ... and ultimately your readers. Well-developed books distinguish themselves by a high level of readability.

What is readability? There are three levels to readability.

1. The surface structure of the words on your page: grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
2. Style and voice: the choice of words, the use of literary techniques and images (metaphors, similes, comparisons), and the tone of the book (contemplative or ironic or comic).
3. The content level of your book that makes your world come to life: story and character, the interplay of dialogue and narrative, pacing, and world building.

A book with high readability is polished, refined, sophisticated, mature on all these three levels. In other words, a book with high readability is not a first or second draft. It has been revised many times, in an effort to erase the mistakes editors just love to hate. Editors are experienced readers. When editors stumble over a mistake or an error, other readers will likely stumble as well. So, I'd like to give you some tools to help you spot these errors and edit them away, so that *your* readers won't fall.

So, let's get started with:

### **A. The Basics: Writing (this is the easy stuff; everyone can fix this)**

I am talking about spelling, punctuation, grammar.

#### 1.) Run that spell-check!

It should be clear that you don't hand in a manuscript with mistakes, right? I can't tell you how many manuscripts land on my desk with so many typos, punctuation errors, and grammar issues that I don't even want to read on no matter how great the story promises to be.

Your words are your tools. Make sure those tools are in working order.

I don't want to spend much time on these basic issues, and so I've just listed a few common errors on the slide. Like typos that pick the "dye" that gets you a cool hair color when you meant the "die" that gets you dead. Or a paragraph that starts out in the past tense and ends in the present tense.

These basic issues distract your readers from your story or your argument. For example, without punctuation that helps me understand what you are trying to say, I may have to read a sentence several times, and that makes reading infinitely harder. You don't want that. Your job as writer is to take your readers by the hand and lead them through your book; your job is to ease them through your story.

Words, punctuation, and grammar are your tools to do just that. Faulty tools call attention to themselves instead of to the world and characters they build. You have worked too long and too hard on your manuscript to give an editor or an agent an easy reason to turn down your work or your readers a reason to close the book. Take the time, run the spell and grammar check, and then re-read your manuscript yourself to make sure you caught all mistakes. If you are having trouble with these issues, please consult the appropriate textbooks. Or a professional copyeditor or proofreader. It's absolutely worth it. (Oh, and if you find a mistake on these pages, give me a call and I'll give you a free 30-minute consultation.)

## 2.) Don't serve leftovers.

No spell check will notice inconsistencies that are left over from an earlier draft. I have read novels where characters have been "introduced formally" way after they first appeared in the novel, because chapters had been moved around. And I've read novels where characters seemed to appear out of nowhere or disappear suddenly, because chapters had been cut. Other very typical leftovers from earlier drafts are characters that suddenly change names, or subplots that don't lead anywhere.

You as the writer may not notice these inconsistencies because you are so familiar with your work. You fill in the blanks automatically. So, in addition to that spell-check, run what I like to call a second-reader-check. Give your manuscript to someone who will *critically* read your book and tell you of such inconsistencies.

Slightly more difficult to fix than outright mistakes are bad habits, because often we don't recognize our bad habits. Let's talk about writing in style, which requires creativity and innovation. And sometimes it may require revising or even cutting sections you really like.

**B. Beyond the Basics: Writing in Style (this is bit more difficult because it requires creativity and innovation)**

3.) When writing is heavier than a ten-ton-truck

Consider this sentence: "There was this house at the end of the street. It was so old and dilapidated that it reminded me of the house of a witch." It is just fine to say something like that in a conversation. When we talk, we all use unnecessary words and phrases like "there is/there are." But: those phrases inflate our sentences. And when you write, you need to avoid this, you need to polish your sentences. "The house at the end of the street was old and dilapidated, reminding me of a witch's house." So go through your manuscript and get rid of such unnecessary lead-ins, and instead, cut right to the meat of your sentence. Every sentence has a point. Get to it as quickly as possible.

Using stilted language is a common trap for writers trying to sound overly sophisticated. I

often come across phrases like “I am of the opinion” when the writer could have said “I

believe/I think,” or: “of utmost importance” instead of just saying “important.” Writers often assume that noun phrases such as these are a sign of formal and sophisticated writing, when really they are just cumbersome.

The passive voice is another supposed sign of supposedly formal writing, when really it makes the manuscript seem ... passive. Remember, you want to lead your readers through your work, you want to call attention to the latest plot twist *not* to the language. This is true for all writing, even literary and poetic novels. While there language is meant to be a protagonist, if it calls attention to itself, it will make readers realize that they are reading a novel, and you don't want that. So, go through your manuscript and look for stilted wording or sentence structure. It just distracts unnecessarily from your story.

The flip side of this coin, by the way, is slang. Mind you, both slang and stilted expressions may be excellent tools to define your characters in a dialogue, but they are likely not the appropriate choice in a narrative section or a non-fiction piece. I'll talk more about language in dialogue later.

Too many noun phrases make your language cumbersome, too many adjectives and adverbs make it seem heavy and lazy. Here's why: While adjectives and adverbs seem to clarify and describe what you want to say, in fact, most of them are far too vague to do the job.

Look at this sentence for example. “She was listening to music as she was happily walking down the street.”

As a reader, I am not sure what to imagine here. How does her happiness show? Is she

smiling to herself? At passers by? Is she skipping along to the tune? Is she happy because she is walking down the street rather than up? Remember, you are leading your readers through your book, so be as precise and detailed as you can. This is not to spoon-feed your readers; this is to stay in control of your material. As your readers, we want to know where our imagination should step. Show us how that happiness expresses itself in your particular story. Look for words or actions that describe more precisely what you wish to say. “Listening to music and skipping to the tune, she made her way down the street.” This sentence conjures up a precise image in your readers’ heads and thus you are successfully leading them where you want them to go.

Adverbs most often come up in dialogue taglines. “Turn down that music,” he angrily said. No need for the adverb here. Instead, move the anger into the dialogue itself. “I’ll break that stereo of yours if you don’t turn down that music now!” or “Turn down that music now or I’ll call the police!”

#### 4.) When style isn’t really style but writing in your comfort zone

Every writer has a set of words they fall back on. I like to use the phrase “rather than” and I often use qualifiers like “quite/not quite” or “a bit.” I am sure you have such favorite words as well. You may not notice them unless you really look, but an editor or agent or reader sure will, because cumulatively, they become repetitive. So, do look for them, create a list of your favorite words, and go through your manuscript hunting them down. Highlight them in different colors, with a colored pen or a post-it note. You’ll be surprised how many colorful pages you’ll end up with. Revise them all. Look at your dialogue, too, and make sure your characters don’t use *your* favorite words, but theirs, words that fit

their background, their personality, their circumstance, *not* yours.

Repetitive sentence structure can give the entire manuscript a monotonous and boring feel as well. Vary the length and structure of your sentences to change the rhythm and flow of your words. Not haphazardly, of course. Use longer sentences to give pause or introduce background, use complex sentences to pass on information, describe a character, or add ambiance to a scene. Shorter sentences work in suspenseful sections. They speed up the pace. As if your manuscript was out of breath. Particularly towards the end of your novel. There your plot is racing towards its conclusion, no matter whether it's a thriller or a love story or a literary novel.

And, allow your characters to use varied sentence structure depending on their background, personality, and emotional state in any given scene.

Don't write like you speak, and don't write like others do. Write to serve your story, your characters, your point. Essentially this means: Step outside your comfort zone and find your voice.

#### 5.) Clichés are clichés. Except when they aren't.

Writing outside your own comfort zone also means leaving trusted clichés behind.

Clichés weren't always clichés. They once were creative images or poignant observations that became clichés over time because they were used often. Everyone knows what you mean when you say, "it fits like a glove." In a conversation, the very fact that everyone knows what you mean makes your point. But: clichés are predictable, and writing should never be predictable. So, hunt down your clichéd images and replace

them with your own. Perhaps you could say “it fits like a black cat on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>” or “like milk and brownies,” but that’s still pretty clichéd. So how about “like retainers on teeth” or “like a mouse on a mouse pad.” I came up with these last two images as I was typing on my computer right after a meeting with my son’s orthodontist. I’m mentioning this not to say that these images are great – they are not – I say this to illustrate that it is not only okay but vital to use your own world to create new images – your hobbies, your profession, your neighborhood, your friends, your kids. Your images can and should be new and personal, but they cannot be so personal that they are obscure. If I were to say, “it fits like the old castle in the vineyard,” nobody could relate. Does this mean it fits well or it doesn’t? I am referring to the castle in my hometown Esslingen, Germany, which is perfectly nestled into the vineyard surrounding it. But, unless you’ve been there, you have no idea what I’m talking about. So don’t be clichéd, be innovative and personal, but not obscure.

While you should avoid cliché and stereotypes, staying away from them altogether is not necessary. You could use a clichéd phrase as an identifying mark for a character. Or, you could use stereotypical behavior not to lull your readers to sleep with a predictable set of ideas, but to surprise them. Let a mother be the one who leaves clothes all over the living room floor while her teenage son cleans up after her. But: go a step further, and do so *not* to describe a neglectful mother or a dysfunctional family, but a caring mother and a perfectly normal family with ... well, a mom who does not fit the stereotype. Not only will turning the stereotype upside down give your readers an instant and instinctive grasp of the unique relationship between this mother and her son,

it will also keep your readers on their toes, and make them turn the pages to see how else you will surprise them.

And that is what you want. You want your readers to turn the pages because they can't wait to see what else you'll show them. You want to take them by the hand and lead them where otherwise they would not go.

And with this we've arrived where the essence of fiction or memoir writing comes into play: Writing to make your world come to life.

**C. Far Beyond the Basics and right back to them: Writing to make a World Come to Life (this is the big picture stuff; the substance of your novel; where it's at)**

Your job as writer is to create a world populated with characters that live their lives before our eyes, and you need to do so with words only. There is no camera to show us that the rug is red or that the police car drives off with lights flashing; there is no sound to give us the sirens; and there is no actor to make a comment sound bored or sexy or irritated or funny or scared. It's the words and their rhythm that build the world and make it turn. This is hard. And there is plenty of room for mistakes. But it is also fun. Because you are in charge. You can write whatever you want. Anything goes. As long as it makes sense within the universe you create.

Let's talk about some common pitfalls.

6.) Don't let your characters resemble cardboard cutouts.

This issue has several sides to it. I've read many manuscripts where every character

received a detailed description the first time he or she appeared. The description might tell me what the character looks like, where and how he grew up, what she does for a living and prefers to eat for breakfast. As we discussed, repeating your favorite words and sentence structures makes a manuscript monotonous; and likewise, using large structural blocks over and over, like introducing each character in the same way, creates a sense of predictability and monotony.

In addition, giving us a character's entire backstory in one sitting is overwhelming. Readers can't digest all that information. As a result, the plot comes to a screeching halt, all suspension of disbelief is gone, and we as readers are aware that we are meeting a new character in a novel.

In short, giving us background information about a character, describing the way a character looks and behaves is *not* the same as *creating* a character who lives and breathes.

So what is? How do you create characters?

Let's say one of your characters is the President of the United States. The simple fact that the character is the President will conjure up ideas in your readers. These ideas may be formed by the real-life presidents, or they may be formed by the qualities your readers connect with the office, such as power, or responsibility, or even a specific political platform like Lincoln's bid to end slavery. Now, how do you steer these preconceived ideas to create the one and only and very unique President in your novel.

Imagine this:

In one of your scenes, your President is sitting in the Oval Office, pouring over papers. He is alone. Suddenly someone knocks at the door. A quick glance at his watch tells him that it is time for his meeting with the Speaker of the House. The President knows that within a few seconds, he'll have to face the Speaker of the House, who happens to be his arch enemy, whether for political or personal reasons does not matter.

Now imagine that your President is chewing gum.

What does he do in the split second between the knock and the entry of his enemy? Does he swallow the gum? Does he take it out and throw it in the waste paper basket behind him? Does he take it out and stick it under his desk, where plenty of other gum is stuck already? Or does he keep chewing?

You can choose any of these four possibilities, but whichever one you choose will define your President's personality. Now, not everyone will have the same connotations with these four different behaviors. To me, a person who sticks his gum under the table seems a bit mischievous, like a person who still has a lot of boy in him. A person who throws the gum in the waste paper basket, on the other hand, does the right thing, likes order and cleanliness. A person who swallows the gum is someone who thinks he has done something inappropriate, yet is not ready to stand by it. Such a person is not strong or self-assured. For if he was, he'd keep chewing the gum. So, the person who chews the gum even though his archenemy will notice, seems like someone who is sure of himself, a leader who does not care what others think of him, because nothing will affect his natural authority.

Your readers may have different connotations with these simple actions, but, first of all, this is how it is in real life – our actions speak differently to different people. And secondly, together with the many other details, actions, and behaviors you will show us in other scenes, the fully developed personality of *your* very own President will emerge.

And this is your goal, you want fully developed characters, complete with a psychological make-up, with a past, with hopes for the future, fears and worries, with a favorite food and pet peeves, with idiosyncrasies, and, most importantly, with a motivation or a reason for why they are doing or saying whatever it is they are doing or saying.

#### 7.) Show, don't tell.

The gum-chewing President, of course, is an example of *show, don't tell*. *Show, don't tell* means developing scenes in which characters act and interact in situations specific to your novel. But *show don't tell* does not mean that you need to shy away from description. On the contrary, you need descriptions. That's the camera work of your narrative, if you will. The narrative describes the setting, creates the ambiance of a scene, introduces backstory, builds the world your characters live in, and unfolds the events that drive your plot forward. The mantra *show, don't tell* refers to *the way* the narrative describes these things.

Imagine this:

A couple sits in a restaurant, their favorite little French place around the corner, where they celebrate their wedding anniversary. This scene cannot happen in a vacuum. Your

narrative must create the atmosphere in the restaurant. If you want the restaurant to be loud, don't just tell us it was loud, but have a waiter drop a tray and send dishes crashing to the floor, have a guest call for the check, have the phone ring, either that of the restaurant, or that of a guest at the neighboring table. That would also show us that the restaurant is crowded. So, don't just write "it was crowded," but describe the lines of guests waiting to be seated, or a waitress having trouble weaving her way to our couple's table, because she has to navigate the chairs blocking the walkway.

And that's just the background situation. Your narrative also has to create the situation between husband and wife, their specific circumstance. As your reader, I don't know if they are happily married, but I *want* to know. Again, don't just tell us "they were happily married," or, "they were teetering on divorce," or "they just started seeing a marriage counselor." Show us in their behavior. Are they eating in silence? Does the conversation stop within a few lame interchanges? Do they drink champagne and toast to each other? Does the husband look at other women? Does the wife text her best friend or does she turn off her phone when she receives a call? Do they fidget with their napkins or reach out for each other's hands? Do they linger over more champagne and dessert and tell the babysitter that they'll be late? Or do they ask for the check just as soon as the main course has been served?

In short, your narrative should observe, not comment. "It was loud" is a comment. So is "They had nothing to say to each other any more." Describing dishes crashing to the floor and two people texting on their cell phones are observations. And that is the essence of *show don't tell*.

Obviously, it is perfectly acceptable to throw in a narrator's comment once in a while. Your description of husband and wife texting on their anniversary certainly can end with a commentary such as "They had nothing to say to each other any more." But if you've done your job, such a comment is likely not necessary. Trust your readers. We'll get it. No need to tell us something we've seen for ourselves. No need to state the obvious. Like everything else, it is a matter of balance.

### 8.) Dialogues are not speeches.

Balance is the operative word when it comes to dialogue. You want your dialogue to sound natural, yet natural sounding dialogue is not at all the same as recorded conversation. The many pauses, ah's or wells, constant interruptions, superfluous commentary, chit-chat, and small talk we deal with in real life would be tremendously boring to read. Dialogue in a novel is polished speech that fulfills certain functions: Dialogue passes on information between characters, and to the reader. Dialogue propels the plot forward. And, dialogue reveals the personality of the dialogue partners, as well as their relationship. And it does so both with the words that are spoken, and with those that are not.

Now when I say that dialogue is polished speech, I don't mean that your characters should erupt into uninterrupted speeches. Far from it. In fact, that is one of my pet peeves. None of your characters should ever lecture or pontificate. At least two people should exchange information, ask questions, answer them, comment, fight, tease... whatever. A dialogue should always have at least two people communicate and interact verbally *and* non-verbally. The way they interact with each other says a whole lot about

them and about their relationship. Dialogue defines character. On several levels.

First, the words a character chooses say a lot about the character's background, personality, and emotional status. Does he or she use sophisticated language or choose words right out of the gutter? Does he or she use long or short sentences or is he or she too upset or too distracted or too busy to use full sentences altogether? A member of the royal family in the 16<sup>th</sup> century would choose different words than a military general in the 1940s or a teenage girl in the 1980s. As I mentioned before, your characters' words should be theirs, not yours. This will help your readers to distinguish them from each other, and to instinctively grasp vital elements of their background or personality. No need for lengthy background information if you choose the right words to put in your characters' mouths.

The words of a dialogue must also fit the given situation. A teenage girl will speak differently if her boyfriend just broke up with her than when she's just been voted homecoming queen. Sadness or depression and happiness or excitement can and should show in your character's word choice and sentence rhythm.

And of course, a teenage girl will speak differently when she talks to her BFF or her teacher or, God forbid, her mom.

That's one level – the level of spoken words.

But: People don't necessarily say what they mean and don't necessarily mean what they say. Every conversation has a subtext that may not be apparent if you only hear the spoken words. Dialogue is not only about what is being said, but also about how the

dialogue partners feel about and relate to each other. That's the second level. The level that's interesting.

Do they like each other? Who has the upper hand? Do they trust each other? *Show us* in their gestures, glances, body language. *Show us* in their behavior while they're talking. Is anyone leaning in or moving away? Anyone nervously fidgeting with a pen? Anyone crossing arms? Looking out the window because he is bored or to the floor because she is ashamed? Anyone's eyes darting while frantically looking for a new lie to tell?

So, your dialogue should be driven not so much by *your*, the writer's need to pass on information or move the plot, but by your characters' needs. What does any given character want or need from the dialogue? Are the two dialogue partners on the same page, or do their respective needs conflict? Even if the dialogue mainly needs to convey information, do so via a character's needs. In that case, information is what one of the characters wants and the other likely has, but may or may not be willing to give.

I am talking about tension and conflict and motivation.

Remember our anniversary couple in the French restaurant? Perhaps the husband suspects that his wife has an affair, and at this juncture of the novel, confrontation is unavoidable. A supposedly innocent question such as "How was your day?" is fraught with tension if the subtext reveals that the husband is suspicious or the wife evasive when she turns off the phone as a potentially telling call comes in.

Dialogue, the words a character speaks, and narrative, the words the writer uses to

describe a scene, work together to create the subtext to a conversation. The scene becomes more than just two people talking in a restaurant. It defines their relationship, brings it to a boiling point, and thus propels the plot forward.

9.) Anything goes! But: Just because you say so doesn't make it so.

For if the subtext reveals the marital tension of our anniversary couple, the reader cannot wait to find out how the dinner will end. And it could end in many different ways.

In a novel, anything goes. Nothing is impossible or taboo. The wife could indeed have an affair and the marriage ends right at that dinner table. Or perhaps they make up and she'll end the affair instead. She might also not have an affair and convince her husband that she is faithful. Or perhaps she can't convince him, and although she *is* faithful, his jealousy eventually destroys their marriage. Or perhaps he's the one who has an affair, and he points the finger only to distract from his own misbehavior.

Seriously. Anything goes. But: just because you say so doesn't make it so.

By that I mean that plot twists must be prepared within the novel *before* they happen, and characters must have a reason for their behavior, no matter if they behave in or out of character. So, the husband's suspicion at the dinner table cannot come as a total surprise to your readers. Somewhere along the way you must have sown the seed. For example, if his suspicion is unfounded and he's just a very jealous guy, his jealousy must show elsewhere in your novel, too. If, on the other hand, the affair is real, the wife's behavior leading up to this dinner must have given us a clue: perhaps the clichéd late nights at the office or, a little less clichéd, a sudden new haircut or a new hobby.

Not that these clues should be so obvious that they allow us to predict the way your story goes. No, writing should not be predictable. But in retrospect, once the plot has twisted a certain way, your preparation must become clear. It's your readers' aha-moment, if you will.

For just like dialogue is not just recorded conversation, a novel or a memoir is not just recorded life. A novel or a memoir provides meaning to the world we live in, which is to say that in a novel or memoir, the succession of events must make sense. One event must lead to the next, like that unstoppable freight train I mentioned in the very beginning. Your characters' behavior must be motivated by their psychological disposition (jealousy) or by their reaction to these events (why did my wife suddenly pick up karate). It is the interplay of events and character behavior (typical or not, in character or out) that moves the plot forward. NOT *your* idea of where the plot should go. Your hand, the writer's hand pulling the strings of his characters, must remain invisible. Only then will characters write their own story.

For example, a typically shy and rather submissive character should not speak out against a more dominating character *unless* the novel has prepared this atypical behavior. A mother may believably overcome her shyness if she is speaking on behalf of her child. But: This works only if the novel has shown that this mother and her child are close, and if and only if the plot thus far has shown that the mother's atypical behavior is urgent. In other words, her failure to overcome her shyness must have a negative effect on her child. Character and plot work together: only if the novel shows us a close relationship between this mother and her child will her atypical behavior be

believable, and only if her atypical behavior is important within the plot will the story develop naturally.

That brings me to my last common error: hangnail writing.

#### 10.) Avoid hangnail writing.

What is hangnail writing? Writing that is unnecessary and irrelevant within your novel, like a hangnail. A hangnail may be a single scene, or an entire subplot, or a character without a function.

Clever banter between characters that does not propel the story forward, that does not offer new information or a deeper understanding of the characters or their relationship. Give your readers too much of such clever banter and they will get bored.

An involved backstory for a minor character. Introducing a minor character with too much weight will mislead your readers, and perhaps make them think that the character is a leftover from a different draft. Or a subplot that is so disconnected from the main plot that your readers think they're reading a different novel. Do this too often, and your readers will stop trusting your storytelling abilities, question your every step, and there goes the suspension of disbelief.

Remember, your job is to take your readers by the hand and lead them through your world. This means that you need to show them *what is relevant*. No more, and no less.

Why? Because everything you do show us has an impact on us. We notice every character you introduce, so none of them can appear and disappear at random. We

remember every plot twist, so if you don't follow through, we are left with loose ends.

The flip side of this coin is that you absolutely must share everything that *is* relevant.

Don't assume that your readers know what you know. Remember instead that readers only know what you are telling and showing them. We don't know that your gum chewing President is a father first and the President second, unless you show us that he blows off an important meeting to go play catch with his son. We also don't know that, within your novel, he grows into his role as president, unless you show us later that he blows off his son when missing a meeting might mean the loss of a soldier's life.

Neither scene is relevant on its own, but together they complete the puzzle. So, what you write in the beginning must foreshadow the end, and what you write in the end must echo the beginning. The middle draws a straight line, introducing and developing the characters and events that make the carefree gum chewing and catch playing president blow off his son for the good of the country.

What those events are is up to you. That is where your imagination, your creativity, your ideas, your insights come in. What I've been talking about are some of the tools that help bring those ideas to life and unlock the potential of your manuscript.

### **Unlock the potential of your manuscript!**

Writing a book involves a lot. I could talk about many other issues such as suspense and point of view, time and place, timeline and pacing. Getting everything right in the first draft is near impossible. So, accept that successful writing is a lot of editing and revising. But: revising your own work is hard.

So here are a few tips:

First, take time off once your first draft is finished. This will allow you take a step back and gain some distance from your work. And distance you need. A week, a month, whatever your timetable allows. Use that time to read other people's work, and when reading, check for examples of the writing tools we've discussed.

Then reread your own manuscript. Three times. Before you revise. Seriously, three times: First, read for concept, story, character, plot... begin editing with the big picture issues, the stuff I've ended with. Then read looking for style, wording, sentence rhythm, superfluous scenes and sections. Third, read to fix grammar, punctuation, typos.

Choose different color pens and flags for these three rounds of reading, and mark pages, sections, and individual sentences. Color-coding helps in the editing process.

And only once you've read through it three times, wearing a different editorial hat each time, go back and start to revise. Good luck!

**Unlock the potential of your manuscript!**



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