

Secrets to Selling Your Novel: Key Writing Skills that Matter from a Writer's and Agent's Perspective

Presented by Robin Perini and Jill Marsal

Introduction

i. Take what you want and leave the rest.

What a writer ... "wants is a set of rules on what to do and what not to do in writing fiction...."when one begins to be persuaded that certain things must never be done in fiction and certain other things must always be done, one has entered the first stage of aesthetic arthritis, the disease that ends in pedantic rigidity and the atrophy of intuition." — John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*

ii. For every rule, there is an exception

Key 1. Great Characters

1. Maximize Strong Character Goals

i. Story is character. Character is the metaphor for a human being; story is the metaphor for life.

ii. How much a character cares about his/her goal is in direct proportion to how much the reader will care (Laura DeVries)

iii. Goals often relate to backstory and this is where backstory can be effectively used to give emotion to the goal and make it compelling for both the character and the reader

2. Exploit Character vs. Characterization

i. Characterization - Sum total of observable traits and qualities

ii. Character - Deep true nature of your character, revealed by making choices under pressure

- Ask yourself what your characters would NEVER do, then figure out a way to make them do it.
- Each time you remove an obstacle, uncover another.

iii. Duality of Character

- Character's strength is his or her weakness

3. Show us the character, don't tell us the character

4. Braid Plot and Character

i. Why is this character the ONLY character for this story?

- Choose plot to exploit character.

ii. Actions don't drive the story. Actions drive emotions, emotions drive the story. (Laura Baker)

iii. Is the drama motivated?

iv. It's a cycle

v. Internal vs. External Conflicts



Key 2. Create A Compelling Romance

1. **Character vs. Character.** In romance, romantic tension comes from the heroine's goals conflicting with what the hero represents (and vice versa)
2. **Goals.** Need to ask, "What is your Heroine's Goal?". This is their most secret wish—they don't even know they are wishing this sometimes.
3. **Motivation.** This is often the result of what happened to them growing up or in the past. Often comes out of backstory. "Because of her painful past, she wants to stay out of relationships."
4. **Conflict.** How does this put her in conflict with the hero?
 - i. If he loves, he opens himself up to emotional pain. *She is challenging his core beliefs of keeping himself closed off from love.*
 - ii. The A-Ha moment, "In the end, what does she realize she really wants?"

Key 3. Focus on Story and Pacing

1. **Take Advantage of the Concept of Turning Points**
 - i. **Significant and surprising scene or series of scenes** which change the direction of your plot or subplot for the character and the reader.
 - ii. **Turning points illustrate** deep character, theme, braiding of internal/external conflict, layering through conflict, action, emotion and surprise
 - Make sure turning points relate to character's goals, to central conflict between characters, or to progression of the plot (i.e. mystery and romantic suspense, danger escalation; category- central conflict playing out in new and escalating ways)
 - iii. **Escalate** the internal and external stakes as you go from turning point to turning point.
 - iv. **A good rule of thumb:** 1 MAJOR turning point every 25,000 words
2. **Take Advantage of Arcs**
 - i. **Character, Scene, Chapter, Turning Points, Book**
3. **Scene and Sequel**
 - Definition of Scene: GOAL – CONFLICT - DISASTER
 - Definition of Sequel: EMOTION – QUANDARY – DECISION – ACTION
 - Identify the Scene's Arc
 - Identify the Beginning of the Scene:
 - Emotionally where was Jack (your character) in the last **scene**?
 - Where is your character presently in the plot?
 - Emotionally, where your character is going by the end of the story
 - Identify the End of the Scene (before or after you write):
 - Emotionally where your character is
 - Where your character is now in the plot
 - Emotionally, where your character is going by the end of the story

- Does this scene strengthen where you want your character to be at the end of the story or has the emotional arc changed? How?
- Critical to use story to move character arc forward – figure out where your character is, what the arc will be, and what event is going to help them realize this and get there

Key 4. Revise and Polish

1. Common Mistakes to watch out for

- i. Overwriting
- ii. Backstory
- iii. Telling
- iv. Too many adjectives
- v. Devices that are not properly set up
- vi. Filler
- vii. Body parts doing things
- viii. Gazes and breathing

2. Revision

- i. Big Stuff (Character, Conflict, Plot, Theme, etc.)
- ii. Small Stuff

“*In simplicity lies power.*”—Sandra Canfield

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General Rules

1. Keep it Concise and Specific
2. Keep it Logical
3. Look at words
4. Look at overall rhythm and flow
5. Get rid of filler and cobwebs
6. Must advance character, setting, plot, or conflict – otherwise delete
7. Don't tell us what you've just shown us – ex: woman hit by a Porsche, next scene call telling her employer she was hit

- iii. Final revision for pacing and compelling storytelling

3. Three Versions (Activate the story (from telling to showing))

FINDING HER SON

VERSION 1 (The Thinking it Through On Paper Draft)

"Remind me again why you thought spending Thanksgiving with them would be a good idea?" Josh Wentworth grumbled, as he flipped on the windshield wipers to batten away the snowflakes that were coming down faster. The SUV curved through the Denver traffic and he took the Quincy exit. "It'll be a disaster. It always is. I don't want Joshua's first Thanksgiving to be more like a root canal than a celebration."

Emily Wentworth shot her husband a frustrated glance. "Our one-month old won't be warped. Besides, your parents deserve to get to know their new grandson." An overwhelming sense of rightness filled her as she glanced at the baby in the backseat, his cheeks rosy with warmth as he slept. "With Ryan deployed overseas, your family's all he's got."

VERSION 2 (Honing in on More Important Details)

Eric Wentworth was dying. He didn't have to see the stop sign's shaft penetrating his chest or the blood pulsing from the wound. Strange, though. He felt no pain, but he could feel his life slipping away as surely as the ravaging winter wind whistled through his crumpled car.

He wasn't ready to die. Not yet. He had a wife who loved him and a new baby boy he'd just met. He couldn't leave them alone and unprotected.

"Eric?"

He struggled to turn his head toward his wife's weak cry.



VERSION 3 (Final Version (Active Writing Utilizing Deep Point of View. FINDING HER SON, March 2012 Harlequin Intrigue®. 2011 Golden Heart® Winner (Stolen Lullaby)

Icy wind howled through the SUV's shattered windshield, spraying glass and freezing sleet across Eric Wentworth's face. He struggled in and out of consciousness. Flashes of memory struck. Oncoming headlights on the wrong side of the road. Skidding tires on black ice. The baby's cries. Emily's screams.

Oh, God.

Why couldn't he focus? Above the wind, he heard only silence, then an ominous gurgling sound from his lungs. He shifted his head slightly to check on his wife, and a knifelike pain seared his neck. He stopped, staring in horror at the shaft of metal guardrail penetrating his chest. Blood pulsed from the wound, but he couldn't feel it. He couldn't feel anything.

Eric was dying. And it was no accident. He hadn't taken the threats seriously, hadn't told Emily what he'd done. Why they were all in danger.

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COWBOY IN THE CROSSFIRE**VERSION 1 (Starting Point 1)**

Four-foot long icicles and Texas didn't go together.

Blake Reynolds paced the wooden floor, nerves wound tighter than an over-cinched saddle. Sleet pounded the roof, hammering the century-old ranch house with what the Weather Channel had termed the worst ice storm in decades. He'd issued an order hours ago for folks in the county to hunker down until further notice. Below freezing temperatures and unrelenting ice made travel hazardous. Blake tilted the brim of his hat back as he glanced at the silent police radio sitting silent on the oak sideboard. "Guess we're lucky it's quiet, huh Leo."

A whine escaped the Lab-mix, curled on the rug next to the fire.

"Or not."

Being alone with his thoughts didn't suit Blake well. The sparse room gave him no distraction, but at least he hadn't unpacked enough in the eighteen months he'd been back to make running from memories any tougher than normal.

VERSION 2 (Starting Point 2 to Increase Tension)

"Mommy, please don't die."

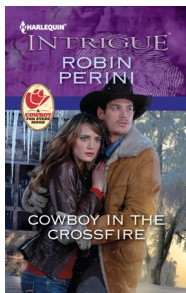
Banging sleet echoed like a drum off the car's roof. Amanda Hawthorne struggled in and out of consciousness as a small, icy-cold hand patted her face.

"The bad men might come back."

Oh, God. Had they been found again?

"Ethan?" *Her heart thudded, and she twisted toward his voice. She had to get her son to safety. Knifelike pain sliced across her flank. "Oh. She crumpled in her seat, pressing hard against the gunshot wound on her right side. Wet and sticky. It had started bleeding again.*

Biting her lip against the throbbing, she pasted a confident smile on her face and looked toward her five-year-old. "You okay, little man?"

**VERSION 3 Final Version (Starting Point 3 to Add Danger).**

COWBOY IN THE CROSSFIRE, July, 2012 Harlequin Intrigue, 2013 RITA® Finalist

A wicked gust of winter wind buffeted Amanda Hawthorne toward the front entrance of her brother's home. She wrapped her flimsy coat tighter around her body and lowered her head. Another cold blast nearly knocked her down. Even the weather fought to keep her out of Vince's house. Well, this freak ice storm wouldn't win, and neither would her brother. He'd be furious, but she was staying. Just until she found another job.

She breathed in, hoping to kill the perpetual french-fry smell that permeated her clothes from her final shift at Jimmy's Chicken Shack. She could've lived with the odor and her aching feet, but she couldn't take his octopus hands, his foul breath or his large body trapping her against the wall in his storage room. She shuddered at the memory. She wouldn't go back. But first, she had to face Vince.

With a deep breath, she unlocked the door. "Big brother, I've got bad news. You may have houseguests for a while—"

Her voice trailed off. The photos that had lined the entryway hall lay shattered on the tile floor. The small table near the doorway teetered on its side, crushed.

"Vince?" Her heart thumped like a panicked rabbit. She ran into the living room. The place was in shambles. "Ethan?" Oh, God. Where was her son?

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Final Thoughts – The Secret

- 1. From a Writer's Perspective**
- 2. From an Agent's Perspective**

Bio and Bibliography

Robin Perini. A 2013 RITA finalist, award-winning and national bestselling author, Robin is devoted to giving her readers fast-paced, high stakes adventures with a love story sure to melt their hearts. Robin's strong characters and tightly woven plots garnered her seven prestigious Romance Writers of America Golden Heart® finals. She won the Golden Heart® in 2011, and that title became her first Harlequin Intrigue, Finding Her Son (March 2012). Her other 2011 Golden Heart® Finalist, In Her Sights, was published by Amazon's Montlake Romance (November 29, 2011). Robin went on to sell fourteen novels in approximately two years. You can find out more information at her website www.robinperini.com or visit her on Twitter @RobinPerini, Facebook (Robin PeriniAuthor), Goodreads or Pinterest. Her agent is Jill Marsal of Marsal Lyon Literary Agency.

Book list

MONTGOMERY JUSTICE NOVELS (Amazon's Montlake Romance)

- In Her Sights (November, 2011)
- Behind the Lies (April 2013)
- Game of Fear (August 2014)
- Edge of Deceit (2015)

CARDER TEXAS CONNECTIONS (Harlequin Intrigue)

- Finding Her Son (March 2012)
- Cowboy in the Crossfire* (July 2012)
- Christmas Conspiracy (October 2012)
- Undercover Texas** (June 2013)
- The Cradle Conspiracy (December 2013)
- Secret Obsession (August 2014)
- Secrets, Lies and Trouble (December 2014)

* 2013 RITA® Finalist

** RT Book Reviews Top Pick

Jill Marsal is an agent and partner with the Marsal Lyon Literary Agency. A publishing veteran, she has been agenting for fifteen years and previously worked for Dorchester Publishing, editing women's fiction, romance, and suspense.

Jill's emphasis is commercial women's fiction and all genres of romance, including contemporary, romantic suspense, paranormal, historical, category, and others. She works with her authors to help them realize their dreams of being published and to build a long term career as a writer. The Marsal Lyon Literary Agency strives to partner with their clients on all phases of the publishing path. We represent many New York Times, USA TODAY and other bestselling authors. The agency was ranked the #1 literary agency for Women's Romance deals on Publishers Marketplace in 2011, 2012 and again in 2013. Jill loves to be surprised by a unique plot or characters and is always looking for a new, fresh voice or approach. For more information, please visit www.MarsalLyonLiteraryAgency.com.