

# **The Secret to Powerful Writing: Activate, Activate, Activate!**

*Romance Writers of America National Conference  
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*Presented by  
Claire Cavanaugh and Robin L. Perini*

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*“Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.” –Anton Chekhov*

*“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.” – Mark Twain*

# The Secret to Powerful Writing: Activate, Activate, Activate!

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## I. INTRODUCTION

- 1) “Take what you want and leave the rest.”
- 2) What is **ACTIVATING** your writing?
- 3) Get out your pen and paper and get ready to work...we’re going to **SHOW** you how to activate your writing!

## II. POINT OF VIEW – YOUR MOST POWERFUL WEAPON

- 1) Deep Point of View – critical to active and emotional writing. You must be **INSIDE** your POV character’s *body* and *mind*.
  - i) The character feels what they feel; knows what they know; interprets events through *their* knowledge, backstory and personal beliefs...NOT those of the writer. (Otherwise the writing comes off as an ‘author intrusion’)
  - ii) Example: CHARACTER: Luke Montgomery, Investigative Reporter, Ex-Army Ranger
    - (1) Cerebral/early version:

He looked around the noisy bar, noting the familiar faces and wondering which cops were dirty.

TRANSITION to the published version  
(2) From *In Her Sights*, Montlake 2011

A sharp rap of the cue ball hitting its target echoed like a gunshot over the raucous laughter. Nope, Sammy’s Bar hadn’t changed. Neither had the clientele. Cops. And some of them were on the take.

## III. EMOTIONS – YOUR MOST POWERFUL AMMUNITION

- 1) A writer’s power is in their ability to evoke an emotional response in the reader. Make the reader FEEL something. Joy, sorrow, empathy, sympathy, disgust, fear, love, passion, anticipation, dread...
  - a) Show, Don’t Tell Emotions
  - b) Written exercise on expressing an emotion without using the name of it.
    - i) It’s not “He was afraid.”

- 2) Words – the writer’s tool
  - a) Evoke emotions with your word choices
  - b) Use powerful, picturing-forming and image-making words

The smell of diesel clung to the air surrounding the fleet of buses. Gabe recognized the bulge beneath his dad’s coat, just under his shoulder, packing heat where most wouldn’t notice. His movements were too furtive to be answering a routine call from the sheriff’s office. And Patrick Montgomery sure as hell wasn’t wearing his official uniform. (Game of Fear, Montlake, 2014)

#### IV. ONE PLACE YOU MUST ACTIVATE - ELEMENTS OF A GREAT OPENING (USE AS MANY AS POSSIBLE)

1. Set your tone and maintain it.
2. Introduce your theme early, and explore it on different levels throughout the book
3. Create a question in the reader's mind
4. Intensity, Characters, Compelling Situation

##### 5. Sample Openings

- i. Dialogue Only – Ender's Game by Orson Scott Card

Title: *ENDER'S GAME*

*"I've watched through his eyes, I've listened through his ears, and I tell you he's the one. Or at least as close as we're going to get."*

*"That's what you said about the brother."*

*"The brother tested out impossible. For other reasons. Nothing to do with his ability."*

*"Same with the sister. And there are doubts about him. He's too malleable. Too willing to submerge himself in someone else's will."*

*"Not if the other person is his enemy."*

*"So what do we do? Surround him with enemies all the time?"*

*"If we have to."*

*"I thought you said you liked the kid."*

*"If the buggers get him, they'll make me look like his favorite uncle."*

*"All right. We're saving the world, after all. Take him."*

- ii. Third Person Internal Dialogue – Naked In Death by J.D. Robb

Title: *NAKED IN DEATH*

*She woke in the dark. Through the slats on the window shades, the first murky hint of dawn slipped, slanting shadowy bars over the bed. It was like waking in a cell.*

*For a moment, she simply lay there, shuddering, imprisoned, while the dream faded. After ten years on the force, Eve still had dreams.*

*Six hours before, she'd killed a man, had watched death creep into his eyes. It wasn't the first time she'd exercised maximum force, or dreamed. She'd learned to accept the action and the consequences.*

*But it was the child that haunted her. The child she hadn't been in time to save. The child whose screams had echoed in the dreams with her own.*

**V. SAMPLE ACTIVATION OF TWO OPENINGS****NOTE: MORE EXAMPLES AVAILABLE AT THE WORKSHOP****1. VERSION 1 (The Thinking it Through On Paper Draft)**

DARK GUARDIAN, Kent County, England, 1816

Damn Richard St. James to hell. He'd slaughtered them--he'd slaughtered them all.

Jaw clenched with fury, Jonathan Price urged the horse he'd commandeered at the last posting stop forward. His hands and cloak were soaked with blood. He had to get home. He could only pray he wasn't too late.

The sky billowed with black clouds, and little light illuminated the old Roman road he raced down. His heart pounded, and agony ripped through his chest.

He'd witnessed carnage during the war. Waterloo had been a bloodbath, but Anne should never have witnessed the massacre she'd seen tonight. Until a few hours ago, his fiancée had known nothing of the brutality of man.

St. James had changed her--forever. The bastard.

Anne's family--murdered in cold blood. All of them, down to her young sister barely out of the crib.

Jonathan's stomach wretched at the memory of the Cavanaugh's laid out in front of their home like some gruesome message, their throats torn open as if an animal had feasted. But even that hadn't shredded his heart like Anne's mewling cries as he'd cradled her in his arms. He just prayed her family in York would be able to heal her mind, even if her heart were forever broken.

**2. VERSION 2 (Honing in on More Important Details)**

DARK GUARDIAN, Kent County, England, 1816

Damn Richard St. James to hell.

He'd slaughtered them. He'd slaughtered them all save one.

A mist of night smoldered the burning remains of the Price family home, and Jonathan blinked through the soot streaking the land that had once been the family's pride and joy. He breathed in, willing the nausea churning his stomach to not desecrate this place. They deserved better.

Jaw clenched, he forced himself to stare into their sightless eyes one by one. His father, his mother, his young sister. Lined up in a row, their bodies were darkened with ash, the only color, the red seeping from their shredded throats.

But that wasn't the worst of it. St. James hadn't just killed them--he'd tortured and humiliated them. Jonathan couldn't bear the thought of what the bastard had done. His young brother, Edward, by happenstance still at Eton, would never know, Jonathan vowed.

With care, he covered his young sister's bare body, and concealed his mother's naked torso with her decimated gown. As for Jonathan's father, St. James had emasculated him, the blood soaking his pants.

Deep fury, like Jonathan had never imagined, even on the bloodiest Waterloo battlefield, skewered his gut like a thousand splinters of glass.

**3. VERSION 3 (Active Writing Utilizing Deep Point of View)**

DARK GUARDIAN, Kent County, England, 1816

Jonathan Price hurled himself through the fiery hallway, clutching his sister's limp body close to his heart. "Don't give up, Elizabeth." His desperate plea was swallowed by the hellish roar of the inferno crackling around him. Blistering heat seared his hands and face. Black roiling smoke scorched his lungs.

Maddened with grief, he kicked the flaming debris from the doorway and burst into the rainy night. He staggered across the muddy yard, and coughing and hacking, fell to his knees before laying his sister on the sodden grass.

The fire illuminated the vicious wound on her neck, and then her sightless eyes.

Dear God, what manner of beast had done this? Torn the very skin from her throat, killed her with no mercy?

He whirled toward Price Manor. The blaze erupted from every window and door, scarlet serpents of flame devouring all in their path, engulfing everything.

Where was the rest of his family? The servants, the butler, even the scullery maid? Had they escaped or had the beast killed them, too?

"Please." He raced back toward the house, only to be grabbed and flung to the cobblestones. Dazed and gasping for air, Jonathan peered up at the cloaked shape looming over him.

"You cannot save anyone, you fool. They're all dead. Your family, and Lady Anne's as well."

#### 4. **VERSION 1 (The Thinking it Through On Paper Draft)**

##### FINDING HER SON

*"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."*

#### 5. **VERSION 2 (Honing in on More Important Details)**

##### FINDING HER SON

*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.*

#### 6. **VERSION 3 Final Version (Active Writing Utilizing Deep Point of View)**

This is the prologue that won the Golden Heart in 2011 and sold to Harlequin Intrigue.

##### FINDING HER SON

*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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## VI. Q & A

### *Bios*

**Claire Cavanaugh** is an award-winning writer and teacher and is published in short non-fiction. She is a three-time Romance Writers of America® Golden Heart® Finalist and Daphne Award winner for Paranormal Romantic Suspense. A popular speaker, she is known for finding compelling solutions to plot and characterization problems and has helped numerous authors across the country hone their skills and get their writing back on track. Several have gone on to hit the bestseller lists. A former bookseller, she currently freelances with Larsen-Pomada Literary Agency, assisting their clients and other writers with editing and story development.

**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](http://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

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