

# 250+ WRITING TIPS

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO WRITING,  
PUBLISHING, AND MARKETING YOUR BOOKS,  
VOL. 1

M.L. RONN

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Version 1.0

## WHAT YOU'LL LEARN IN THIS BOOK

Hey there, wordsmith! Welcome to 250+ *Writing Tips for Indie Authors*. My name is Michael La Ronn. I'm the author of over 50 books of science fiction and fantasy and self-help for writers and the host of the popular YouTube channel for writers, Author Level Up.

Most importantly, I host a podcast called Writing Tip of the Day, which is a podcast that delivers a crisp writing tip Monday through Friday in under five minutes per day. The show is available on all the major podcast networks and Amazon Alexa devices.

“Writing Tip of the Day” was so well-received by my audience that people wrote me and asked if I would turn the podcast into a book. So I wrote this book so that my readers could have a resource to refer to instead of a bunch of podcast episodes. This book (Volume 1) represents the first year of tips on the podcast.

I know what you're probably thinking—“Great. Another podcast turned into a book...”

Trust me, I acknowledge that there are a lot of crappy books out there where authors just hit the easy button and transcribed all their audio into a book that feels cheap and lazy.

That's not the case here.

When I wrote this book, the podcast episode was just the starting point—each chapter is personally written and authored by me. Most tips have even *more* material than I give on the show. My goal is for this series to be comprehensive and a little unusual compared to other writing books on the market, in a good way. Yet it will be concise and easy for you consume. If you liked my other books for writers, you'll love this series.

## **Why I'm Qualified to Write a Book with 250+ Writing Tips**

As I mentioned, I've written over 50 books and earn decent income from my books. Not enough to quit my day job (yet), but I work pretty hard at being a writer. I built my writing career while raising a family, working a full-time job in the insurance industry, running a YouTube channel, three podcasts, and attending law school classes in the evenings. My hope is that my experience makes me unique—and the tips in this book reflect that.

Writing shouldn't be hard, and you shouldn't have to spend hours reading books to be a writer. I believe that, first and foremost, writing is all about jumping in and learning as you go. That's what this book will help you do. But I hope it will open your mind to ideas and concepts about the writing life that maybe you haven't thought of.

## **How to Use This Book**

. . .

However you want! Read it straight through, or if you dare, read one tip every day, preferably in the morning to set the tone for the rest of the day. This book (and series) exists to help you become a better version of yourself, however you choose to do it.

Also, there are more than 250 tips in this book. Way more. But 250 is a good number for marketing!

The book is organized by topic, so it's easy to jump around if you need to, especially if you want to use it as a resource long after you're done reading.

In any case, I'm glad you're here. If you're new to my community, be sure to subscribe to Writing Tip of the Day, as well as my YouTube channel Author Level Up. In the meantime, welcome aboard, and let's have some fun.



## WRITING CRAFT TIPS



## HOW TO STAY INSPIRED AND KEEP YOUR CREATIVE WELL FULL

Have you ever thought about how many ideas the human brain has every day?

If ideas could be harnessed into energy, they could power the world with plenty of energy still to go around.

Think about that as a writer—what if you could capture more ideas and tap in to that amazing well of energy that flows around us every day?

### **Write Your Ideas Down**

Write your ideas down. One way to do this is with pen and paper. Pull out your notebook whenever the muse strikes, but just remember not to lose it. One time, I accidentally dove into a lake and had my notebook in my back pocket of my swimming trunks and didn't realize it. I lost my entire pocket notebook of ideas. Don't do that!

You can also use a note-taking app like Evernote or Bear to capture your ideas, which is my method of choice. If you're

walking along and get a killer story idea, just pull out your phone and write it down. You can even use these note-taking apps to capture photos, video, and even audio notes whenever inspiration strikes.

In my note-taking app, I have two folders: a sketchbook and an idea book. The sketchbook contains interesting things that could end up in one of my stories one day. My idea book contains ideas for books or marketing projects I might try for my books.

Commit to writing down one idea every day, even things that may seem trivial. Do this for a really long time, and you'll have hundreds if not thousands of ideas to draw from whenever you have writer's block.

## **Capture Ideas Successfully**

Have you ever considered *how* to capture your ideas?

When you write stuff down, what do you write? Whenever possible, capture your ideas in the five senses. For example, if you're in a coffee shop and feel inspired by the venue, here's how I might capture it. Instead of writing long paragraphs, I would write down imagery.

What do I see? A barista with a stud in her lip.

What do I hear? The coffee machines humming, the people at the next table discussing a Bible verse.

What do I smell? The malty aroma of the tea I'm drinking.

What do I taste? Hints of coffee and autumn leaves.

What texture do I feel? This one's tricky, but I like to think of textures that I can see, like the reclaimed wood at my table.

In just a few sentences, I captured the blueprint of the coffee shop. I'll be able to recall these images forever. Even years

later, looking at them will make me feel as if I'm back there, drinking my tea and watching the people.

And here's the real magic: whenever I need to write a coffee shop into my next book, I can literally import the images I captured, word for word if I wanted. I'm doing the work upfront now so I can benefit later. I've written over 50 books, and this technique has paid dividends for me book after book. I use it every day. I have a sneaking suspicion that it will work for you too. And it only takes a minute or two.

## **Be a Student of People**

When new writers ask me what they can do to improve their craft, I always tell them to be a student of people. It's fundamental to fiction writing.

Being a student of people means putting yourself in places where you can watch them. Coffee shops, grocery stores, gas stations, airports—wherever people are, you can watch them.

The next time you're in public, pick one random person and watch them. Don't be a stalker, please, and don't be creepy...

But let's say you're at the grocery store and there's a man in front of you in the checkout line. Maybe he's in dusty construction clothes. What's his story? More importantly, how might you write him into one of your books? If it were me, I'd first try to get a sense of the person's energy. Is he calm? Frantic to get through checkout? Constantly on his phone and distracted?

Next, I'd pay attention to his clothes and appearance—the dust on the man's shirt or the mole under his left eye, for example.

Lastly, I'd pay attention to the words he uses when he

speaks, and how. Sometimes, I might even write down what he says, like if he has a unique accent and says something unusual.

When you're observing people, ask yourself how you would write this person into your story. That simple question is the gateway to writing better fiction and nonfiction because it trains your brain to translate people onto the page. The best part about this exercise is that there are no wrong answers. You don't have to be right—you're just practicing and stretching your mind.

## **Collect Words Like Pokémon**

Collect interesting words. This will help you expand your vocabulary so you can write more compelling imagery, which will help you when you capture ideas.

Use pen and paper or a note-taking app like Evernote to write down unique words whenever you encounter them.

Now, you can go overboard here. Don't go off collecting rare words that no one will ever know, the Latin names of flowers, or things like that. The point is not to make the reader reach for a dictionary. They don't like that. (If you write literary fiction, that's a different story.)

The key is to expand the vocabulary that your readers will understand. Chances are, there are simple words that you aren't aware of that can have a big impact in your story.

I read a poem once where the poet used the phrase "police cars cockroaching through tunnels." The imagery was completely unexpected, but it always stuck with me because it was so vivid.

That's why reading good books is so important—bestsellers often use arresting and unexpected word choices. Poetry is also another great source of fun and interesting words.

Create a repository of words in one long document and review it every once in a while. I think you'll find fun and unique opportunities to use perfect words that your readers won't expect, but will find delight in.

## **Mix Ideas Around and Review Them Regularly**

Mix your ideas around. If you've followed the previous few tips, you're going to collect a lot of ideas very quickly.

What do you do with them?

Every once in a while, I like to go into my idea book and review all the ideas I have. I scroll through them randomly with no real agenda. What I find is that things start jumping out at me. An idea I captured yesterday might merge with an idea I captured three years ago and create a unique synthesis.

For example, back in 2011, I reread *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, which is one of my favorite books of all-time. I absolutely love Long John Silver. I always thought it would be interesting to write a Long John-inspired character myself someday.

In 2015, I happened upon some amazing dragon images on Pinterest, one in particular of an enormous black dragon. I also read Shakespeare's *Richard III* that year. Somehow, I got the idea to write a story with an evil dragon antihero whose personality was one part Long John Silver and one part Richard III. That character became the hero in my *Last Dragon Lord* series, which is one of my most popular fantasy series with readers—available in ebook, paperback, and audio if you want to check it out at [www.michaellaronn.com/thelastdragonlord](http://www.michaellaronn.com/thelastdragonlord).

Mix your ideas together and you'll be surprised at what might happen.

## WRITER'S BLOCK IS LIKE A LEAKY BUCKET

First things first, what is writer's block?

I define it as the inability to start or continue a story.

I'm sure you've suffered from writer's block. Maybe you're experiencing it now. Perhaps you woke up this morning with your brain in a fog about how to finish the chapter you're on.

For writers, writer's block is as common as the common cold, but it doesn't have to be that way.

### **The Leaky Bucket Analogy**

Pretend that you have a bucket full of water, and it's leaking because there are several holes in it.

How do you fix a leaky bucket? You plug the holes.

Now pretend that your mind is the bucket.

What if I told you that your mind is brimming with ideas and inspiration, but that it's leaking inspiration, and that leak is the reason you have writer's block?

What if I told you that curing writer's block is really no different than plugging holes in a leaky bucket?

Many people think that writer's block is this magical, mysterious force, but I don't. I believe it stems from only a few key problems, all of which are easily fixable.

I can honestly tell you that I don't get writer's block anymore. I plug the holes in my bucket regularly, and it's full of water!

## **The First Hole: Fear**

The first hole we need to plug is fear.

It doesn't matter who you are; fear affects every writer. We're afraid of making mistakes in our books, afraid of what readers will think, afraid of our book not selling, and so much more.

That fear can drip into your manuscript. When it does, it will paralyze you. You'll start to think, "What's the point of writing" or "No one will like this story" or "I'm just an imposter posing as a writer."

Many writers let this fear get to their heads. Many quit writing because of it. I don't want you to be one of those writers.

If you're worried about your success as a writer, just think of me. I've written over 50 books of fiction and nonfiction, published over 300 YouTube videos, 200 podcast episodes, three writing courses—and I had some pretty bad failures early on in my career. But I kept at it, and now I have a pretty respectable platform.

I wish I could give you a recipe for eliminating your fear, but it doesn't exist. But I need you to learn to be fearless and

silence that inner critic in your head. If you don't, you'll regret it for the rest of your life.

Whenever that inner critic says you're inadequate, keep pushing and write 100 more words.

Whenever it tells you that readers won't like it, tell it that readers get to decide that, not anyone else.

If you can get a handle on your fear, you'll find that writer's block won't visit you nearly as frequently because you'll be confident in your work—and yourself.

I give you permission to be fearless today.

## **The Second Hole: Personal Circumstances**

Personal circumstances are the second hole in our leaky bucket.

Personal circumstances play a big part in our lives whether we like to admit them or not.

Sometimes we get sick.

Sometimes our family members need us.

Sometimes we get unusually busy at work, or have other important obligations that have nothing to do with writing that call us to be present, for a time.

That's normal.

I will admit to you that one of the secrets of longtime professional writers is that they keep at it, rain or shine. But if you look at many of their careers, almost none of them write every single day, year after year without fail. They have stops and starts.

Don't beat yourself up when life strikes. For example, when I wrote this tip, my daughter was having her tonsils out. I didn't expect to get much writing done for a week or two, and that was okay. Family is more important to me.

Life happens. Deal with the things you need to deal with.

Set a timeline to restart, and when it's time, pick up where you left off. That's all you can do.

The reason this applies to the leaky bucket example is because if other circumstances are distracting you from writing, then your bucket is going to leak, no question about it. Once you deal with the problem, you'll find it magically stops leaking.

One of my favorite sayings is from Arthur L. Williams, a motivational speaker. He has 11 magical words that hold the secret to his amazing success. These 11 words will revolutionize the way you think about your writing life. These 11 simple words will also insulate you from burning yourself out.

Are you ready for them?

"All you can do is all you can do, and all you can do is enough!"

Print that out and put it on your wall, because it's the essence of this tip.

## **Create Some Distance**

This tip is a little controversial, but it does work on occasion.

I'm sure that you've experienced writer's block, and you know how agonizing it is. You would do anything to get rid of it, right?

Do something that most writing coaches and experts would tell you NOT to do: walk away, for a time.

All the tips I've given you so far have been deep. Eliminate fear, deal with life circumstances, and so on. But this one is simple.

Sometimes, you just need to walk away from your work for a little while. Get some distance between you and your manuscript.

When we get too deep into our work, we can lose perspective. Sometimes, fresh air is all we need to get our perspective back.

I'm not telling you to walk away from your work forever. At best, a few hours or one day is the most I'd ever recommend. Any more than that and you run the risk of compounding the problem.

I had a friend who was a serial procrastinator. He finished a book, and in his words, "I took a deep breath to relax, and it lasted eight months." Don't be him.

Procrastination in general is bad, but there is something to be said about giving your brain some time to figure out how to solve a problem.

For example, it's common advice in the self-help community to use sleep as a discovery tool. Tell your brain what problem you want to solve, then take a nap or go to bed, and see what happens in the morning.

In any case, while I don't recommend that you use this tip frequently, just understand that it is a tool in your toolbox that can get you results if used correctly. It can help you gain perspective on how to continue fixing your leaky bucket.

## **Filling Your Bucket**

Assuming you followed the previous tips, our leaky bucket shouldn't have any more holes in it.

But there's probably not much water left in it either. Your bucket's water level may be so low that there's only a few drops of water in it. It may feel like you'll never have another idea again. This used to happen to me many times.

You have to learn how to fill that bucket. In other terms, we

might say you need to fill your creative well. You can do that by ensuring that you have a steady stream of water flowing into your bucket at all times, so much that your bucket is always full—even overflowing.

Constantly expose yourself to new experiences. I'm an introvert and I prefer to stay at home on the weekends, and I suspect that you're a lot like me. But I make it a point to get out of the house on a regular basis.

Recently, I went to my local farmer's market in downtown Des Moines, Iowa. The city blocks off several streets downtown and the market is full of great food, vendors, live music, and people-watching opportunities. I've been to the market many times, but this time in particular energized me and gave me some great ideas for my next book. Just being around all that positive energy was enough for me.

Do this enough and your bucket will soon be full.

## PLACES OF INSPIRATION

I can't stress enough to learn the art of people-watching.

My mission is to shape your mind and transform how you see the world. In other words, I want you to learn how to SEE like a writer.

Learning how to SEE like a writer means developing what I call laser vision—seeing something in everyday life and then instantly being able to see how it would translate into fiction or nonfiction. You have to develop that skill.

The best way to develop your laser vision is to visit five key places in your community. You can do this for free, and your visits will give you an immense number of opportunities for people-watching.

### **Service-Based Businesses**

Coffee shops, gas stations, convenience stores, tailors, dry cleaners, shoe shiners, barbers or hairstylists, funeral homes, insurance agencies, post offices, banks, and car washes are just a few

of the many options in your community. Chances are high that you're going to visit at least ONE service-based business today alone!

I love visiting these places because I'm only there for five minutes or so, but I can walk away with an incredible sketch of human nature.

For example, I visited a barber, and I paid careful attention to the sights, sounds, colors, and smells. When I left, I used the Evernote app on my phone to jot down some of the sensory details that I observed as well as my brief conversation with the barber. I can easily import these details into a future novel.

If you're writing a novel, maybe you'll have a character that's a barber or some kind of service-based business in it one day. Maybe in space. Or in the Wild West. You can apply your observations in any setting. Service-based businesses make cameos in novels all the time. Think Diagon Alley in Harry Potter or how every epic fantasy book ever has a shopkeeper of some kind.

## **Restaurants**

Restaurants are incredible places to people-watch and absorb ambiance. They're also a great place where you can eavesdrop on some fascinating conversations.

For example, I once had a business lunch on the top floor of one of the tallest buildings in Des Moines. I ate lunch with the entire blinking lights of the city beneath me. Every time I looked out the window, I saw snow-custed roofs and cars far, far below that looked like toys moving along a kid's race car track. I overheard two businessmen at the table next to me brokering a deal to build a new strip mall. Pretty cool stuff.

When you visit a restaurant, I want you to first pay attention to the theme. Is it upscale? Is it a seafood restaurant that invokes imagery of the sea? Or maybe it's a standard Americana restaurant with checkered floors, red gingham tablecloths, and waiters with rectangular caps and white uniforms.

Next, pay attention to the people. Are the wait staff running around like decapitated chickens, or are they lounging around, joking amongst themselves, or are they so bored that they're falling asleep?

Lastly, pay attention to the patrons. What's their demeanor? What words are they using in their conversations?

I'd be remiss not to mention the food, but you can always make that up if it doesn't taste good!

## **Parks**

Almost everyone lives within walking distance of a park. Parks are peaceful places, and they're amazing places to steal book ideas from.

Sometimes with parks, I don't focus on the people there. I like to look at the place and think about what kind of people MIGHT visit this place.

For example, there's a park within walking distance of my house that my daughter and I visit. It has a soccer field, a playground, and a gazebo.

I see the place and I think about the people that might be painted against the greenscape of grass, trees, and flowers.

African immigrant children practicing soccer in the fields, for example. Or drooling toddlers waddling across the mulch bed of the playground, and cheerful parents chasing them around. I think about those kids, and how they might come back

to this playground in twenty years and reminisce about their humble beginnings.

And the gazebo—I see birthday parties, quinceñeras, Fourth of July barbecues, families playing lawn games, eating catered meals from a local restaurant, or dancing to loud music from someone’s Bluetooth speaker. And, at late at night, I imagine shady people doing drug deals in the gazebo, and a police car sweeping the place with a spotlight at 4AM.

You can do this too. It doesn’t cost a thing—just a few calories to get to a park and a willingness to use your imagination.

## **Television**

You can visit this place of inspiration without leaving your living room! This place will let you travel across the world without ever leaving your couch. That’s right, I’m talking about television.

Too much TV will melt your mind, but I think people often forget that it’s also a window into other cultures.

For today’s exercise, you just need cable TV, Netflix, Hulu, or your on-demand provider of choice. If you don’t have a TV, then you get a pass for this tip!

I want you to watch a documentary. Sure, you could watch a movie or a television show, but you won’t get the same benefit.

Documentaries are vehicles for learning. Pick a documentary that you’ve never seen before on a topic you don’t know much about.

Watch the people. Get a sense of them. Get a sense of the places. Go in with the intent that you’ll expand your mind and take away one thing, however small, that you can apply to your craft.

Maybe you watch a documentary about growing marijuana, a big trend right now. What's it like to be a legal marijuana grower? What might that person be like, and what kind of life would they live?

I love documentaries for this reason. They're the perfect way to escape, learn, and be entertained.

## **Downtown**

Every place has a downtown.

If you live in an urban area, downtown might be city blocks full of skyscrapers.

If you live in a small town or a rural area, it might be the town square or main street.

What's it like there?

For example, in downtown Des Moines, Iowa, where I live, downtown is a pretty busy place, but it's still fairly laid back compared to bigger cities like Chicago or New York City. There is a skywalk system that connects many of the buildings, and the inside of the skywalk system is like a big shopping mall. There are fashion boutiques, restaurants, businesses, and panhandlers playing guitars. People frequently stroll through the skywalks on their lunch breaks. The stores in the skywalk are slowly dying, and it's sad to see local business close every year, but so many young people are moving downtown that the skywalk system will eventually make a comeback.

If I were to write downtown Des Moines into a book, it would be a vibrant downtown area, but it would also have a young, hip vibe to it because a lot of young people are moving there to experience the loft lifestyle. Decades ago, downtown Des Moines wasn't a hot destination—it was rather boring.

In an urban area, studying any downtown area is a great lesson in pacing. Some people are always in a hurry and can't be bothered to stop to give you directions. Others are in their own world. Others are just strange.

In a rural area, though, people in the main square might be friendly to a fault. They'll always chat with you, even if you're a stranger. Or, they might stare at you if you're an outsider. Either way, small towns are great people-watching places too.

## NAVIGATING THE MURKY MIDDLE OF YOUR NOVEL

What is the murky middle? In fiction manuscript, it refers to the period somewhere between 30 percent and 75 percent where writers usually struggle. Even if a writer has an outline, writing the middle of the novel can be tough because it's easy to get stuck.

Every writer struggles with murky middles in some way, whether they are plotters or pantsers. Every novel is different too, so the struggle is different every time, making this problem especially frustrating.

### **The Real Problem with the Murky Middle: You**

Here's what I've learned: the problem with the murky middle often has nothing to do with the story. It usually has to do with the *writer*.

Namely, fear and self-doubt.

The reason we struggle in the middle is because we start to doubt ourselves and we fear what readers will think.

The first 25 percent of a novel is what I like to call the “honeymoon phase.” You’re in love with the book, everything flows, and you’re proud of yourself and the book.

Then, somewhere after the 25 percent mark, the doubt creeps in. What if your first chapter sucks? What if you didn’t foreshadow enough? What if you don’t know what to write next?

These thoughts will inevitably cross your mind. It happens like clockwork, and it’s almost always sometime between the 25 percent and 30 percent mark for me.

The key is to tame your fear. Keep pushing no matter what the inner critic says. If you can control your fear, you’re halfway toward getting out the murky middle.

## **Understand the Territory**

The first 25 percent of the book is the “honeymoon phase.”

Did you know that there is technically a beginning middle, a middle middle, and an ending middle?

We can divide a book as follows:

- The beginning middle is between 25 and 40 percent.
- The middle middle is between 40 and 60 percent.
- The ending middle is between 60 and 75 percent.

This is my opinion, of course. It’s based on writing a lot of books. I find that the “murky middle” problem disappears once

you get to around 70 to 75 percent. Then you have other concerns related to finishing the book.

I believe that the hardest middle is the middle middle, followed by the beginning middle.

The beginning middle can be easier to get through because you can coast on some of that honeymoon energy, even if you're having doubts. Your outline is probably still good at this point, though it may start showing some cracks.

The middle middle is the despair zone. Your outline will probably start failing you at this point. It takes true courage and determination to keep pushing and problem solve issues in your plot.

And of course, if you don't outline, you're writing your entire story into the dark, which takes even more courage!

## **Always Forward, Never Backward**

Beware the urge to backtrack when you're in the murky middle. You'll be tempted to rewrite, retool, and fix areas you're not confident about. This is normal.

Backtracking is sometimes okay, but just understand that it comes with risk, especially if you're in the middle middle. Every day you spend backtracking lengthens the time you'll spend in the murky middle.

If anything, always commit to new word counts every day you're in the middle, even if you have to fix earlier sections in the book. Commit to continuous progress. It's painful, but it's for your own good.

Plus, when you escape the murky middle, you'll have better perspective, so if you need to backtrack then, you'll be able to do it with less chance of getting stuck.

. . .

## **Outline Your Middle???**

This is unusual tip, and not something that you will need to do every time, but it can be helpful.

Consider outlining your middle. As I mentioned in a previous tip, chances are high that your outline will fail around the middle. Once you arrive there, it may be helpful for you to revisit your outline and plan out what will happen in the story now that you have better insights into the plot. It's not always easy, though.

This tip works because if you can plan out the middle, you can give yourself a bit more security in knowing what to write. I don't outline my novels any more, but one time I did outline one of my middles because it was giving me so much trouble that pantsing through it wasn't working.

In any case, keep this idea in your tool box in case you need it someday.

## **Follow Your Fingers**

Sometimes you won't know what to write next. You will come to an inevitable crossroads in your murky middle, and the next move won't be obvious. This is the very definition of despair in a manuscript. It *will* happen to you, and if it's your first book, it may make you want to quit writing. The long-term secret to professional writing is understanding that this despair moment happens in almost every novel, usually around the same point. You can learn to overcome it easily.

When you aren't sure what to do next, ask yourself "What should I write next?"

Then, go for a walk. Do something else for a few hours.

Then, sit down and force yourself to write the next sentence. And then the next one.

It's hard, but eventually, you'll learn to follow your fingers. This is a skill that you will learn over time. Magically, you will write yourself out of a corner and you'll watch in amazement as you do it, almost like watching yourself in the third-person.

Following your fingers takes faith, but you can do it!

## PLANNING YOUR NOVEL

Ready to write a novel but don't know where to start? This chapter has you covered! The tips are perfect for preparing for your next novel or even National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo). They'll help you create a solid foundation for your book.

### **What is it?**

What will you write?

What genre will your book be in? What subgenre? What sub-subgenre?

Who is your main character? What other popular protagonists is he or she like?

What is the setting?

What kind of readers would like the book?

What are some books similar to your idea?

You don't have to know very much at this stage. Just the

basics. All of your answers are still subject to change, but not all of them will, so being able to articulate them early will make it easier for you in the future when you start marketing the book.

## **When and Where?**

In order to write your book, you've got to sit down and write it. Unless you're blessed with forty hours per week or more to write your book, you'll have to find writing time.

When will you write your book? In the morning, afternoon, evening, late at night, or some combination of all of the above? Will you need to negotiate with your spouse or significant other to make time to write?

Where will you write your novel? Hopefully, in a room with a door to minimize distractions! If your home won't work, will you visit a coffee shop or library? If you're participating in NaNoWriMo, is there a "write-in" that you can attend where you can write in the company of other writers?

Now that you've answered those questions, it's time to schedule your writing sessions. Make room for them and adhere to them no matter what.

## **How Fast?**

Not everyone has fast fingers, and not everyone can write a book quickly.

What's your writing speed? In other words, how fast can you type and how much time per day can you allot to writing?

For example, if you write 500 words per hour and you can

only devote 30 minutes to writing per day, that means that you'll be able to write 250 words per day. That means it would take you approximately 200 days, or 6.5 months to write the first draft of a 50,000-word novel. That pace is not good or bad—it is what it is. The only thing that matters is what *you* can do.

If you don't know what your writing speed is, that's okay too. Make an effort to time your writing sessions. Track how long you write, how many times per day you write, and the word count for each session. After a week, you'll have a baseline.

Here's another tip: whatever your baseline is, see if you can improve it by 10%. If you write 500 words per hour, can you write 550 words tomorrow? What would happen if you kept increasing your daily word count by 10%? At what point would your writing fall apart? You'll never know until you try. Push yourself out of your comfort zone. Early in your career is the best time to do it because it'll improve your self-awareness.

## **Which Writing App?**

Your writing app is the most important early decision in your career. A good writing app is like an extension of your fingers—it'll help you write faster and smarter without even thinking about it.

If you spend a significant amount of time in your writing sessions arguing with your writing app, then you're doing it wrong. You need an app that makes writing effortless.

Every writer is different. For some, Microsoft Word is the perfect app. For others, it's Scrivener, Ulysses, or one of the many apps on the market. There aren't good or bad apps—only apps that suit you or don't suit you.

Experiment with different writing apps and find the one

that works best for your personality. Then, if training resources exist, invest in them. Apps like Scrivener have a robust community of courses, books, and YouTube videos to help you learn how to use it more efficiently.

The premium apps will cost money, so you'll have to consider that too.

I paid \$35 for Scrivener, and it was the best \$35 I ever spent because it made my writing sessions 100 percent easier. It was worth the money, even though I didn't have much money at the time. Fortunately, most writing apps offer free trials so you'll be able to test them out before purchasing them.

## **Create a Plan**

Let's recap what we've done so far.

We decided the basics of the novel—genre, hero, setting, and so on.

We decided when and where to write the book.

We determined how fast we can write.

We chose the proper writing app.

It's time to start writing, but first, let's create a plan.

Did you know that writing down your goals is the best way to achieve them? On a piece of paper or in a text file, write down:

- The idea for your novel
- The genre and subgenre
- Anything else that you know about the story
- When and where you will write
- How many words per day you think you can manage, with an estimated finish date

Voila! We've just created a rock-solid plan for our book. Consider the document a contract with yourself—your responsibility is to complete the book by your finish date.



## CHOOSING A WRITING APP: WHAT TO LOOK FOR

As I mentioned earlier, the best writing app is an extension of your fingers. I say all the time that the writing app you choose is the most important decision you will make early in your career. Get it wrong and you'll waste valuable writing time fighting with your app. Get it right and you'll write faster and smarter without even thinking about it.

The problem is that there are many, many writing apps on the market. I can think of at least three dozen off the top of my head, and that's not an exaggeration. This chapter is a buyer's guide to writing apps.

### **A Personal Story About Why Your Writing App is Important**

When I graduated college in 2010, I knew I wanted to be a writer, but I had no idea how. I was working a crappy job as a claims adjuster. My student loans and car note were two-thirds of my paycheck. After taxes, I barely had enough money for groceries and rent.

I discovered Scrivener around this time and I really wanted

it. I was tired of dealing with the formatting quirks and inconsistencies of Microsoft Word, but I knew I couldn't afford to buy Scrivener.

One day, I got so sick of Word trying to assert its moral superiority over the English language that I vowed to buy Scrivener through any means necessary. I had to choose between starving myself and working overtime to buy the app. It was the best \$35 I ever spent. Suddenly, all those problems I had with Microsoft Word vanished and my writing sessions yielded higher word counts.

I recognize that money can be tight, but think about it like this: most writing apps cost less than \$100. In the big picture of your writing life, you plan on making a lot more than \$100, right? What if it were true that the WRONG app was costing you time and money every year?

## **The Major "Styles" of Writing Apps**

Not all writing apps are created equal. In fact, there are several styles to be aware of.

A "What You See is What You Get" (WYSIWIG) writing app uses a traditional Microsoft Word-like experience. You type words onto a blank page and then you export them into one of the major ebook formats. This is the writing app style that most people are familiar with.

A Markdown writing app uses the Markdown syntax to create a simplified writing experience. Markdown uses a series of symbols to accomplish various purposes. For example, hash-tags determine whether a line of text is an H1 or H2 title. A single asterisk surrounding a word on both sides indicates italics, but two asterisks surrounding it indicates bold. Markdown is perfect for works that are going to be transferred to HTML.

Instead of a single project file, Markdown strings your chapters together in a series of text files.

A text editor is the most basic of all writing apps. There are no features except a space to write your words and a style menu. Every document is a continuous scroll.

A writing app can be desktop-based, mobile or tablet-based, a combination of desktop, mobile and tablet, or web-based. Desktop apps are the most popular, but combo and web-based apps are growing in popularity. The benefit of combo apps is their versatility, but most of them exist on iOS only at the time of this writing. The benefit of web-based apps is that you can use them on any device regardless of operating systems or browsers, but there are some valid concerns around security in the cloud.

## **Features to Look for in a Writing App**

I won't go into specific writing apps in this chapter, because the popular apps are always changing. However, the features they offer are relatively consistent. Read the following list and pick out the features that are most important to you. These are the features you want to look for in an app.

*Distraction-Free or Full-Screen Mode.* With the click of a button, the app consumes the entire screen. Sometimes you can change the background color and the page height and width. This feature is great for people who want to minimize distractions.

*Dark Mode.* This is one of the newest features that many writing apps are adopting. Some people like dark modes because the color contrast is easier on their eyes.

*Organized Library.* Instead of having to create separate documents for each chapter, many writing apps allow you to

contain all your chapters in the same file so that you can jump between them as needed.

*Universal Library.* Instead of an organized library, which typically contains one project, a universal library contains everything you've ever written at the click of a button. It's especially great if you blog because you can recall all your blog posts with a click. You can also search across all of your books instead of just one.

*Word Count Tracker.* Keep track of your daily, monthly, and yearly word counts as well as set daily writing word count goals.

*Automatic Backups.* Many modern writing apps back up your work without you having to do anything. This way, if something happens and you lose your work, you can use the backup feature to recover lost sections. With this feature, you'll almost never lose words.

*Outlining Support.* This feature usually allows you to create a cork board or index board where you can post information about your novel, add synopses, and move the content around to your heart's desire. Very helpful for outlining, research, and getting organized.

*Mobile Version.* Consider the power of writing on-the-go. Some writing apps have mobile phone and tablet versions that sync with the desktop version of the app. It's also worth noting that web-based writing apps can be used on mobile phones too.

*Ebook Export.* Most modern writing apps can export to EPUB for e-reading devices, tablets, and phones, and PDF. Additional formats you may need are DOCX, HTML, rich text files (RTF) and plain text files. You never know when you'll need a Word file. The other file types HTML and RTF can come in handy in unique pinches. While most apps export to these formats, they may each offer a different level of customization for how your final files will look.

Those are just a few of many different features that writing apps offer. Which ones appeal most to you?

## **Writing App Pricing**

At the time of this writing, most apps charge a one-time flat fee, usually less than \$100. You usually have to pay for a desktop, mobile, or tablet version separately. The pro of these apps is that they're cheaper, but the con is that you have to wait a long time between updates.

Some apps charge a subscription fee to use the app. At the time of this writing, the subscription fees average \$50 or less. The pro of these services is that the developers update them faster because they have better access to money; the con is that you have to pay to use them.

I don't think either is bad. A lot of people don't like subscription-based writing apps, but I still think they're quite affordable.

There's no other profession in the world where only one tool is required to do your job, and that tool costs less than \$100. Think about all the tools a contractor has to buy. Writers have it so much better. Complaining about an app that costs less than \$100 misses the point of how good we have it.

Anyway, now that you know *why* choosing the right writing app is important, the different styles of apps, the must-have features, and the pricing, you're ready to start exploring!

## OUTLINING METHODS

There are many ways to outline your novel. In this chapter, we're going to talk about outlining methods so you can start outlining your novel if that's your thing. I don't outline anymore, but I outlined many of my first novels and have used almost all of the major outlining methods. One of my most popular YouTube videos EVER is 10 ways to outline your novel, and you can watch it at [www.authorlevelup.com/outlining](http://www.authorlevelup.com/outlining). We'll be talking about a couple of my favorite methods in this chapter. It's hard to do these methods justice in just a few hundred words, so be sure to watch the video if you want more context.

### **The Hero's Journey**

This is perhaps the most popular outlining method among writers. It's a circular way of thinking about a story by chronicling the hero's journey from reluctant hero to active hero. The method was popularized by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

The Hero's Journey is a journey from the known into the unknown and back into the known. It begins with the hero in their comfort zone, with a call to adventure, usually from a mentor. The hero crosses the threshold, or point of no return, gets some help from the mentor along the way while facing challenges and temptations. They then hit their low point, which represents death and rebirth. They undergo transformation, atonement, and become the hero they were meant to be, facing the villain and triumphing. Lastly, they return home transformed and a better person for embarking on the journey.

Luke Skywalker, Harry Potter, virtually any superhero story, and much of pop culture uses the Hero's Journey. Readers are familiar with it and won't resist it. Accordingly, this method is easy to study because you can see it at work in movies.

The Hero's Journey is best suited for stories where the hero has a mentor or helper. Otherwise, you'll have some trouble making it work.

## **The Plot Point Method**

This method was popularized by Syd Field in his book *Screenplay*, and then adapted for authors by Larry Brooks in his book *Story Engineering*. Like the Hero's Journey, the method is used in many modern movies.

In the method, there are major "plot points" that every story needs to hit in order to satisfy the reader.

The *Inciting Incident* puts the story into motion.

The *first plot point* is the point of no return, when the hero makes a choice that puts them on the road to fight the villain. This point is like a door being shut behind the hero.

The *first pinch point* is an encounter with the villain that

sets the hero back, though it need not be the first encounter with the villain.

The *second plot point*, or *midpoint* is when the hero goes from reactive to proactive. They often realize an important detail that will help them beat the villain.

The *second pinch point* is another setback from the villain.

The *third plot point* is the calm before the storm when the hero readies themselves to fight the villain.

The *black moment* is the low point when all seems lost. The hero needs help. This plot point can also appear before the third plot point.

The *final battle* is the face-off against the villain.

The *resolution* is the ending, when most of all loose ends are tied up.

The plot point method is great for beginners because it's easy to understand and you can observe it many modern movies. The challenge with the method is that it is quite formulaic. You have to find ways to not just hit the plot points, or your story will be too short. Sometimes finding ways to expand the story between the plot points is challenging for beginners.

Also, the plot point method only helps you with the story. It doesn't help with character development.

## **The Beats Method**

This method was popularized by Johnny B. Truant, Sean Platt, and Dave Wright of Sterling and Stone.

With this method, you outline your novel by writing a summary of what happens in every chapter (known as beats). Then you write the story to the beats.

Beats are like plot points in that they cover the major parts

of each chapter, but beats let you drill down and capture the minor parts too. The method may be nice for some because it's the most similar to writing for real.

The method is easy to follow, but some writers feel like they have to follow their beats to the letter. It's okay to deviate from your outline if you have to.

Another part of this method is casting your characters.

## **The Snowflake Method**

This method was created by Randy Ingermanson.

It starts with a one-sentence summary of the story.

Next, you "grow" the sentence into a paragraph, and you work backwards until you have a functional outline that explores the main points of the story and the hero's growth.

The Snowflake Method is nice because it starts with the marketing. Ingermanson wrote a book by the same name, and he even created software that will help you create an outline using his methodology.

## **Writing into the Dark**

The last method isn't an outline method—it's a pantsing method!

*Writing into the Dark* is a book written by Dean Wesley Smith. In it, you write a novel without an outline. It's scary but doable.

Instead of creating an outline *before* you write, you can create one as you go. In this method, the outline serves as docu-

mentation of your work and character details. Smith's biggest argument is that outlining before your novel is a crutch.

This method is the hardest of all because you have to wrestle with your fear. This isn't easy for beginners.

If you've been reading this chapter so far and been thinking "none of these methods is for me," then maybe you're a secret pantsier.

Writing into the Dark is the method I personally use, and it has revolutionized my writing. You can check out my video on it at [www.authorlevelup.com/writingintothedarkvideo](http://www.authorlevelup.com/writingintothedarkvideo).

## THE BEST NANOWRIMO RESOURCES

In this chapter, I'm going to recommend some of the best resources to help you survive National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo). If you've never done NaNoWriMo, it's when people all over the world try to write a novel in 30 days during the month of November.

### **No Plot? No Problem!**

If you're new to NaNoWriMo, start with *No Plot? No Problem!* by Chris Baty, the founder of NaNoWriMo. This book is less about craft and more about why you should write your first novel. Baty talks about the impact that NaNoWriMo has had on many people's lives. It's a passionate kick in the pants to help you get started, and great book for beginners.

### **52 Pep Talks for Writers**

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This book is written by the current director of NaNoWriMo at the time of this writing, Grant Faulkner. This book is also not about craft. I describe it as *Chicken Noodle Soup for the Soul: Writer's Edition*. The book contains a series of pep talks designed to help you get through NaNoWriMo.

Pep talks have become popular during NaNoWriMo. It's not uncommon to see writers write blog posts or YouTube videos aimed at aspiring writers.

Faulkner's book is worth reading when you're down and need some inspiration.

## **How to Write Your First Novel**

This book is written by me! I originally titled it *How to Win NaNoWriMo*, but I changed the title because I didn't want it to infringe on the NaNoWriMo trademark. The book is all about how to write your first novel, how to outline, how to research, what to do when you get stuck, and more. The subtitle of the book is *The Stress-Free Guide to Writing Fiction for Beginners*. Whether you participate in NaNoWriMo or not, the book will help you write smarter, faster, and better. You can grab your copy in ebook, paperback, and audio at [www.authorlevelup.com/firstnovel](http://www.authorlevelup.com/firstnovel).

## **K.M. Weiland**

If you've never heard of K.M. Weiland, she's the creator of the popular website *Helping Writers Become Authors*. K.M. is the OG of writing advice websites. She's been giving advice and

helping writers start their careers for over a decade with blogs, a podcasts, books, and even software. You'll be in good hands with anything she creates. There's something to be said about someone who continues to create content when many others come and go. You can visit her at [www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com](http://www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com).

## **YouTube Channels for Writers**

If you're NaNo-focused, check out the official NaNoWriMo YouTube channel. They have many online writing sessions and tips to help you with NaNoWrimo. They also do live-streams where their hosts will write and answer questions.

If you want channels that don't have a NaNoWriMo focus, start with mine at [www.youtube.com/authorlevelup](http://www.youtube.com/authorlevelup).

I like to recommend YouTubers in the writing community all the time, but book form is not the best place to do it because YouTubers come and go all the time. In 2020 alone, several major AuthorTubers stopped making videos forever, which was unfortunate. If you want to know my recommended list of AuthorTubers, check out my YouTube channel. On the homepage of my channel, I have a list of channels I recommend.

## **A Knowledge Database for Writers**

This is perhaps my favorite tip in the entire book because it's something that I would do! Cozy mystery author Elizabeth Spann Craig and developer Mike Fleming partnered together to create the Writer's Knowledge Base, which is a search engine

that contains over 40,000 articles for writers! Type in whatever you're looking for and you will receive pages and pages of results.

Elizabeth shares blog posts, podcasts, websites, and videos for writers on a weekly basis. Everything she shares goes into the database. The result is a MASSIVE resource for writers that is criminally unknown in our community. Search the database for anything you're having a problem with, and it will have a result, I can guarantee you that.

You can find the Writer's Knowledge Base at [www.hiveword.com/wkb](http://www.hiveword.com/wkb).

I hope all of these tips will help you get ready for NaNoWriMo, or at the very least, your next book!

## POWERING THROUGH YOUR NOVEL EVEN WHEN IT HURTS

In this chapter, I'm going to give you some pro but simple tips to help you when you get stuck in a manuscript. This goes beyond writer's block. The tips in this chapter are especially helpful if you're participating in NaNoWriMo or if you're writing your first handful of novels.

Let's talk about what to do if you're feeling a little stuck but want to keep momentum. These issues come up all the time. Writers ask me about them on a regular basis.

### **Should I Write Sloppy? (No!)**

When writers are in a trouble spot in their manuscript, the temptation is to write sloppy as a way to bust through it, with the hope that they will be able to fix the manuscript later. After all, if you can power through a few problematic chapters and get yourself to better chapters where you feel more inspired, that's good for momentum, right?

No.

Writing sloppy is one of the worst things you can do as a

writer. I could devote the entire chapter to this tip, but I'll be brief.

First, writing crappy first drafts leads to what I like to call the OSFL: the "Oh Shit Feedback Loop." You write a shitty first draft, which makes you feel like shit. Then, anything you write after that is shit, and escaping the loop is incredibly difficult because self-doubt and your critical voice have gotten inside your head.

Instead, avoid the OSFL by taking your time and writing as cleanly as you can, even if it's hard. It's better to write 500 good words than 3,000 crappy ones.

Second, you'll spend more time in revision fixing your sloppy writing, which will lead you to feeling bad about what you've written. It may even tempt you to scrap your entire book and rewrite it, which, in my opinion, is a death spiral.

I'm not saying that you shouldn't edit your work—if you need to do multiple drafts, that's fine. I'm simply saying that you shouldn't write sloppy.

My grandfather always said, "Anything that's worth doing is worth doing right." That's great advice for writers too.

## **How to Keep Early Momentum in Your Manuscript**

You've started writing your novel. Everything is great until you reach the 25% mark. Then you start questioning yourself. Then your word counts suffer.

This is what I call the end of the "honeymoon phase." Your initial enthusiasm for the story wears off, and so do your word counts. This happens to many people, myself included. Fortunately, you can mitigate it.

First, use the positive energy you have at the beginning of the writing process and try to double your word count quotas for the first week. If you're going to write a lot and feel good about

it, the first week is the best time to do it. Alternatively, you can also try to double up your word counts once you reach the murky middle or when you're in a mad dash to the ending—those options are slightly harder for beginners but not impossible.

If that fails, simply try to exceed your word count in the first two weeks by 10 percent each day. If you write 1,000 words on day one, try for 1,100 words on day two, and so on. This will insulate you if and when you start to lose momentum later in the book.

Don't fret about losing momentum. After 50 books, there have only been a few where I've lost momentum. Sometimes the loss of momentum came from personal circumstances; other times, it came from me losing motivation. But I always powered through it, and you should too.

Writing a book is a mental exercise. Learn how to wrestle your fear and your self-doubt, and anything's possible.

### **What Happens if You Fall Behind on Your Current Work-in-Progress?**

This is common. You might lose some momentum because you have to miss a day, or you have a word count and you miss it by a few hundred. What do you do the next day?

Do you try to catch up or do you shrug it off and keep moving?

Depends on your personality. I've learned not to worry too much about missing days. In the grand scheme of things, I'm pretty prolific. A missed day or even a week always evens out at the end of the year. So I simply reset and try to do better the next day if I can.

You can try to catch up, but don't hold yourself to unrealistic expectations. For example, if you normally write 3,000 words

per day and you miss a day, that means you have to write 6,000 words the next day. If you don't normally write 6,000 words in a day, you're going to have to find a lot of time to make that happen. Moreover, you're going to have to resist the urge to write sloppy. If you only need to make up 200 words, though—yeah, make it up because you can probably accomplish that task much quicker. I've seen writers burn themselves out trying to catch up after missing word counts, so be careful!

### **When You're Going to Miss Words: A Desperation Tactic**

It's 10PM and you haven't written any words. You're yawning, it's almost bed time, and you know for a fact that you're probably not going to get anything done on your manuscript for the day. It happens to the best of us. What do you do?

Here's what I would do: I'd sit down at the keyboard and make up a silly word count goal. I would see if I could write just 100 words—yes, you read that right—100 words.

100 words isn't that hard, and most people who type at a decent pace can probably attain this quickly without being sloppy.

If you can write 100 words, you haven't lost momentum. You only lose momentum if you write zero words for the day. If you write one word, that's momentum in my opinion.

Also, if you can write 100 words, that's such an easy word count goal that you might just write 150 or 200. And if you write 200 words, you might write 400. See where I'm going with this? It's a psychological tactic to fool yourself into having a writing session even when you don't think it's possible.

Of course, don't deprive yourself of too much sleep, but know that small word counts can help you keep momentum even on days where you might miss.

But remember: don't write those 100 words sloppily!

## **Avoid Manuscript Burnout**

The last tip here is to have fun. It's easy to stress yourself out writing your novel, especially if it's your first couple of books. That's a fast way to degrade your mental health.

As Dean Wesley Smith says (I paraphrase), "Writing is sitting in a chair and making shit up." Who else gets to have as much fun for a living as we do? No one!

That's why you shouldn't be too hard on yourself if you miss a day or two. The law of averages over the course of your life will work in your favor. I can't tell you how many days and weeks I've missed, but I've still got a pretty respectable number of books to show for it. If I can miss regularly and be prolific, you can too.

Have fun. Writing should be fun, not stressful. If you're the type that stresses easily, find ways to be more relaxed during your writing sessions. Focus on finishing, but also focus on protecting your mental health. I can't stress this enough.

The next time you find yourself in a tough spot, having to power through your manuscript even when it's hard, I hope that the tips in this chapter help you keep perspective and remain productive.

## HOW TO WRITE ENGAGING CHARACTERS

Characters are the lifeblood of any story. If you don't have engaging characters, readers won't read your book. Fiction is an escape, and readers love to live vicariously through your hero.

Over the years, I've learned a few tricks to making my protagonists more engaging, and I'd like to share those with you. Hopefully, they help you keep your readers hooked!

### **Treat Your Characters Like Real People**

This tip may sound strange. After all, your characters are fictional, not real, so why treat them like real people?

If you approach your story from the mindset that your readers want to escape from the real world, and remember that your character exists in your readers' minds, then you want to foster that. The character needs to *feel* real to the reader. My recommendation is to adopt the mindset that you're going to treat your character just like you would treat a person in real life.

When you're making decisions about the character, act as if the character is a real person. For example, if you were writing a character's back story, think about a real person. What would a real person be thinking about if they were stuck in a back alley and someone was coming at them from the other side? How would the character would feel? Did something happen to them in their childhood that is triggering them now? What kind of backstory would a real person have that you could couple with the emotion the character feels about someone coming at them from the shadows?

Readers bring all their life experiences to the page, so everything they see through the character's eyes triggers memories from their lives. If you can tap in to that by weaving in backstory that feels real, you can engage readers better.

## **Real Character Development Happens on the Page**

Character development happens on the page, in real time as you write. This is my opinion only, but I have tried outlining, complicated character maps, and other ideas that writing gurus recommend to develop your character and give them an arc, but none of that worked for me. These are things that *writers* recommend, and my experience has been that what *writers* say a story needs is nothing at all what *readers* want (most of the time).

What readers want is an engaging story and an engaging character. They don't care how they get it.

You can plan character arcs and character development all day, but the only development that ultimately matters is what's on the page.

I find that the most enlightening and engaging character

details happen by accident. It's not something you can plan. I follow my fingers, not my head.

I'm not a big fan of character arcs because they don't teach you the craft of writing—they teach you theory. And becoming a good writer is about practice, not theory.

## **Write in the Five Senses**

This is common advice, but I found that I had to learn it many times until it clicked.

When you walk outside, you experience your front yard in all the five senses: you see green grass, hear birds chirping, feel the cold cement of your porch underneath your toes, smell the pine tree in your yard. Maybe you're still chewing a sausage that you ate for breakfast. Anyway, you live life constantly in the five senses, though you may not think about it that often.

Your character also lives life in the five senses. The best way to put the reader in your character's shoes is to describe settings in the five senses.

It seems unnatural to describe things in the five senses; after all, when you talk to people and recap a story of something that happened to you, you don't say things like "the smell of pine needles lingered in my nose as I walked to the mailbox." If you do, people will look at you funny. But in fiction, this is required to keep the reader grounded in the story. It's how you transport them to your world.

Dean Wesley Smith advocates for using the five senses every 500 words, and that tip has worked wonders for me.

## **Avoid Taboo Topics**

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Sometimes writers think that they need to add taboo topics in their book as a way to hook readers. For example, they may have their character engage in things like rape, incest, or gratuitous violence as a way to keep the readers' attention. It's not needed.

As a general rule, readers don't like to see a hero raping someone. It's not a good look on a character you want them to root for. Hell, it's not even a good look on a villain. Often, it feels cheap and desperate when writers include this in their stories. For some genres, such as horror or dark fantasy, readers will tolerate more, but for most genres, it's a good idea to avoid these topics.

### **Watch My Video Series on Engaging Characters**

I devoted an entire season writing engaging characters on my YouTube channel, Author Level Up. I recorded eight videos that delve deeply into this topic, and it's one of my most popular playlists of all time! I cover things like the psychology of heroes, five tips that bestsellers don't want you to know, how to kill a main character without killing your reader engagement, and even how to handle multiple protagonists in your story. You can watch it at [www.authorlevelup.com/engagingcharacters](http://www.authorlevelup.com/engagingcharacters). The videos cover the topic better than I can in this chapter!

## WRITING ROMANCE

It's time for romance! Whether you write romance novels or not, romance is likely to be an important element in your books at some point. If you don't write romance, why not take a few lessons from the hottest selling genre in the world? Romance writers are crazy successful, so let's talk about some tips they use to write compelling romance so we can apply them to non-romance genres like science fiction and fantasy.

### **Romance is More Common Than It Is Not**

Most books in speculative fiction have some element of romance. In fact, romance is more common than it is not. If your book doesn't have romance, it's probably an outlier in your genre. That doesn't mean your book *should* have romance in it; it's just a reality you'll have to accept when you're doing your marketing.

The good thing about romance is that you can do whatever you want. There's no prescribed way to write romance in a

story. It just has to be believable, not make readers roll their eyes, and satisfy readers at the end of the book. The best way to learn how to write romance is to read romance novels. Romance novelists are some of the bestselling novelists in the world for a reason—they have romance down to a science. You can learn so much by reading their books, even if romance isn't what you normally read.

### **Tap in to Your Love Life**

How did you meet your significant other or spouse?

Authors have love lives too. Why not write that into your story as a shortcut?

Romance and writing is similar to the writing and reading problem. When we write, we forget that we ever read a book. When we write romance, we also forget that we ever fell in love.

What were the emotions going through your head when you met your significant other? Why not just import those feelings onto the page? It's an easy way to make your romance more compelling. Borrow the love stories of other people. If you struggle to write romance, this is an easy way to get started.

Your love life is probably full of love, lust, and pain. That's fodder for your story. Make the readers feel those same emotions you felt by putting those emotions in your character's heads, and then letting the readers feel it.

### **Love At First Sight or Clash of the Titans?**

. . .

There are two ways lovers can meet: through a meet-cute or through a battle of the minds.

In a meet-cute, the characters meet in a cute way, like bumping into each other. There's attraction, embarrassment, humor, and good feelings between the two characters.

In a clash of the titans, the characters meet in conflict. They usually don't like each other at first, probably because one character stands in the way of something the other needs. The dislike is usually immediate and lasts for a while until both characters realize the other's softer side. A great example of this would be two attorneys who meet in the courtroom and are fighting against each other, but slowly fall in love throughout the trial but try not to show it. Once the case is over, one of the characters breaks protocol and invites the other for dinner. Then the love begins.

There is no right or wrong way to introduce your characters to each other, but a romance that begins with a meet-cute usually has a different arc than a romance that begins with a clash.

## **Romance is a Subplot**

If romance isn't at the heart of your story, then it's a subplot. A subplot has its own unique, self-contained plot—an introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. It's helpful to think of romance this way in context of your main plot. Just as readers expect your main plot to resolve, they'll also want to see your romance resolve, or at least move closer to resolution. This is one area where understanding writing theory can help you write romance into your story in an engaging way.

## Consider Gender Perspectives

This tip is not intended to be sexist, but rather a starting point. Consider that men and women view romance differently.

Men are rather transactional when it comes to romance. Their egos often play a major part in their decisions. They care about providing financial and physical security in the relationship, and if they can't, they feel inadequate.

Women are more in tune with their emotions in a relationship, and men's lack of emotion or inability to understand *the woman's* emotions is usually a cause of frustration. Women care more about emotional security, which ironically is the type of security that men don't think about first.

Again, take this as a starting point. I'm not saying that all men and women are this way, but it's a helpful starting point. When in doubt, ask a member of the opposite sex how they might react to a certain romantic situation.

For example, if you're a male author, and you think a heroine would be upset because the hero does X...maybe from a female perspective, that actually wouldn't make her mad. Maybe she would be mad because the hero did Y instead. If your story contains a love story between the genders, getting feedback from the opposite sex is a key step in making your romance feel more realistic.

## HOW TO STUDY THE CRAFT

This chapter is all about studying the craft of writing and how to systematically improve your craft. Becoming a student of the craft is a lifelong journey. You can't master it overnight. Plan on learning gradually over time. If you're intentional about your studying, you'll be better next year than you are today, and that's all that matters.

I have lots of tips on studying the craft, but here are my top five.

### **Develop a Learning Plan**

When I became a writer, I was astounded by how much I had to learn. Writing craft, marketing, business, website management, and more. I sat down one afternoon and created a giant list of bullet points of everything I needed to learn. The list was pages and pages long. I made it my goal to learn something new every day. I did this for around a year. My knowledge base grew substantially.

I shared my bullet point list as a lead magnet on my YouTube channel for about a year, and it drove a decent number of subscribers to my mailing list. I retired it because it became obsolete.

Years later, on my YouTube channel, I mentioned the learning plan to my audience, and they said they were interested in it. Now that I had a more significant platform, I decided to try something different. I didn't think people would want a list of bullet point tips when they were used to more in-depth content from me, yet I feared that creating a book called *The Indie Author Learning Plan* would be the biggest dud in my catalogue. I needed a bit of creativity.

The result was the *Indie Author Atlas: Your Guide to the Five Continents of the Writing World*. I took the common things that authors need to learn, turned them into fictional locations, and taught their importance in an entertaining and metaphorical way. For example, one of the locations in the book is the Strategy Islands, a chain of tropical islands where you go to create your author strategy. The first island is Purpose Harbor, and the tourist attractions are:

- *The Tree of Life*: a large divi divi tree on the beach where tourists are invited to carve their mission and vision statement into the tree, and cast an encouraging message to themselves in a bottle for good luck.
- *Author Salon at the Silver Cove Hotel*: a dinner salon at an open-air hotel overlooking the harbor where authors share meals and debate their core values over rum and wine.

There are many more continents and locations to explore. The book is written in the style similar to *Lonely Planet* travel

guides, and it is also has illustrations of the map, which are as whimsical as the narrative. You can grab your copy of the atlas at [www.authorlevelup.com/atlas](http://www.authorlevelup.com/atlas). You can use it as your learning plan.

Whether you use my atlas or not, a learning plan is important. It's not sexy, but understanding what you know and don't know is an important step to become more intentional in every area of your author career.

## Study Writers You Enjoy

Who's your favorite writer? Pick someone who has written a book within the last thirty years and buy five books from them. Or, reread five books from that person that you already own.

Imagine that you are an apprentice of that author, and that every reading session is you studying the intricacies of their handiwork. What can you learn from them? When you read books back-to-back, you get a better sense of that person's style. When you understand their style, you can figure out how to apply it to your work.

For two years, I did this with Michael Crichton and Nora Roberts. I admire their work and I have learned a lot from them in terms of how to create characters and stories that keep my readers hooked.

It's easier to study one or two authors deeply than a bunch of different authors.

Also, only study books you *like*. Life is too short to spend your time in the pages of books you despise.

. . .

## Study Two Sections in Every Book You Read

When you read your books by your writing "masters," don't study the entire books. Pick two or three sections that caught your attention, and figure out how the author did them. If you study an entire book, you'll lose interest. Studying two sections is easier, faster, and you'll learn more.

Ask: "How did the author do this?"

Then ask: "How could I do the same thing, but in my own way?"

Then ask: "What is the step-by-step process for the techniques that wowed me?"

In law school, there is a technique that law students use to study cases. It's called the IRAC method, and it stands for Issue, Relevant Law, Analysis, and Conclusion. If you run any case through those four letters, you can distill the essentials of it down so that you can study for the exam. Why not do the same thing with fiction?

My IRAC method involves Issue, Relevant Books, Analysis, and Conclusion. So when I'm reading a book by Michael Crichton and I love the way he introduces a certain character,

- The Issue might be "how do I introduce a minor character who will have an impact on the plot?"
- The Relevant Book might be Crichton's *Jurassic Park*.
- The Analysis might be a step-by-step play on how Crichton introduces the character.
- The Conclusion might be a nugget of wisdom I learned in my study of the character that can help me create the same emotional impact on my readers.

IRAC is not plagiarism. Instead, it's about understanding the essence of what makes a passage effective, and using that essence in your own story, in your own style, and in your own words. The method helped me level up my craft overnight.

However you study, keep it brief. Don't spend hours and hours studying a passage. Look it over to figure out what worked, jot down what you observe, and move on.

## **Keep a Log of Your Observations**

When you study a writer, write down what you like and your lessons learned. It'll be helpful to you years later when you're writing a certain scene and think, "X author did a similar thing in one of their books. How did they do it again?" Instead of grabbing the book and hunting for the passage, which takes time, you can simply refer to your notes. Your notes don't have to be elaborate; remember, you should only glance at two or three sections from books you like.

Your observation log becomes your "craft brain," almost like a recipe book. If you're a skilled cook, you don't need a recipe book, but it can be helpful to you from time to time. It's the same with writing.

## **Watch My Fiction Analysis Series**

If you're interested in how to study the mega bestsellers and write like the top one percent of authors, check out my Fiction Step-by-Step series. It's a nitty-gritty analysis into the works of

mega bestsellers like Michael Crichton, James Patterson, and Nora Roberts to see what their secrets are. The results may surprise you. These are some of my most requested videos on YouTube for a reason! You can watch the playlist at [www.authorlevelup.com/nittygritty](http://www.authorlevelup.com/nittygritty).

## THE MAJOR SCIENCE FICTION SUBGENRES

Science fiction is a juggernaut genre. This chapter contains a survey of five of the most popular science fiction genres. If you write science fiction, you probably already know these, but if you don't, this chapter may be helpful to you in the future.

One of my favorite starting points for understanding a genre is the website [cuebon.com](http://cuebon.com). It has a genre dictionary that contains virtually every genre and subgenre. There are obscure genres on this website that you've probably never heard of, and it might inspire you!

### **The First Knowledge Point: Hard Versus Soft Science Fiction**

Before we get into the subgenres of science fiction, we must first discuss the cornerstone of science fiction: the distinction between hard and soft science fiction.

Hard science fiction is a story where the science central to the story is as accurate as possible. The classic example of this is

space opera, where the author describes in painstaking detail how a spaceship works. The science is plausible and technically accurate. Readers expect that, and if a story is not scientifically accurate, readers will not be kind to it in reviews.

Soft science fiction is a story where the science central to the story isn't technically accurate, but it meets a minimal level of plausibility. For example, if an author tells you that the spaceships in the novel have warp cores but then don't tell you how they work other than to state that they exist, that's soft science fiction. The science is "soft." Readers who prefer soft science fiction care more about the story, the world, and the characters, and they're willing to overlook some scientific inaccuracies in service of the story.

Hard science fiction is more difficult to write.

If you market your soft science fiction book to hard science fiction readers or vice versa, your book won't get kind reviews. This is why the first thing to know about your book is whether it is hard or soft, regardless of what subgenre of science fiction it is in.

## **Cyberpunk**

According to Wikipedia, cyberpunk is a subgenre of science fiction in a dystopia futuristic setting that tends to focus on a "combination of low-life and high tech" featuring advanced technological and scientific achievements, such as artificial intelligence and cybernetics, juxtaposed with a degree of breakdown or radical change in the social order.

The word "cyberpunk" means "an opportunistic computer hacker" and it was coined in a 1984 short story by Bruce Bethke.

The term was used by William Gibson and others as a label for what would become the entire genre of cyberpunk.

In cyberpunk, there is usually a precious resource that a few powerful people use to control the population. The heroes are usually fighting against the few in order to restore balance to the world. Sometimes the heroes are hackers; sometimes they are not. The tone of the genre is usually dark.

Famous examples of cyberpunk:

- *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick
- *Neuromancer* by William Gibson
- *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson

## **Steampunk**

According to Wikipedia, steampunk is a retro futuristic subgenre of science fiction or fantasy that incorporates technology and aesthetic designs inspired by 19th-century industrial steam-powered machinery. Although its literary origins are sometimes associated with the cyberpunk genre, steampunk works are often set in an alternative history of the British Victorian era or the American "Wild West," where steam power remains in mainstream use, or in a fantasy world that similarly employs steam power.

Steampunk exists in both the science fiction and fantasy subgenres. Science fiction steampunk usually employs science in a major capacity, and fantasy steampunk may have an accompanying magic system.

Prosthetics, airships, unique inventions, historical figures

from the 19th century, and weaponry all feature prominently in steampunk. You might even find dragons in it!

Famous examples of steampunk:

- *Boneshaker* by Cherie Priest
- *Mortal Engines* by Philip Reeve
- *The Golden Compass* by Philip Pullman

## **Dystopian Science Fiction**

According to Wikipedia, a dystopia is a society characterized by a focus on that which is contrary to the author's ethos, such as mass poverty, public mistrust and suspicion, a police state or oppression. Most authors of dystopia fiction explore at least one reason why things are that way, often as an analogy for similar issues in the real world. Dystopian literature is used to "provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural or inevitable. Some dystopias claim to be utopias.

Dystopias make us reflect on our current society and how it can become a slippery slope to a world that no one wants to live in. They're often depressing or distressing, but that's the point. By seeing what the future possibly holds, the genre gives us a blueprint on how we can avoid such a dismal future.

Famous examples of dystopian science fiction:

- *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins
- *1984* by George Orwell
- *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner

## Space Opera

According to Wikipedia, space opera is a subgenre of science fiction that emphasizes space warfare, melodramatic adventure, interplanetary battles, chivalric romance, and risk-taking. Set mainly or entirely in outer space, it usually involves conflict between opponents possessing advanced abilities, futuristic weapons, and other sophisticated technology.

Wikipedia also states that the term "space opera" was coined in 1941 by author Wilson Tucker as a pejorative term.

My, how the times have changed!

Space opera is an umbrella for many different subgenres. It is a diverse subgenre in its own right. It shares many commonalities with military science fiction, which also almost exclusively takes place in space, but the difference is that the hero is not a member of the armed forces. Otherwise, one could argue that space opera and military science fiction share much of their DNA.

Space opera can be hard or soft, optimistic or pessimistic, or have aliens or no aliens. It can even have strands of dystopian, post-apocalyptic, or cyberpunk elements. Space opera's possibilities are as vast as space itself.

Famous examples of space opera:

- *Foundation* series by Isaac Asimov
- *The Culture* series by Iain M. Banks
- *Remembrance of Earth's Past* by Liu Cixin
- *Dune* by Frank Herbert

## THE MAJOR ROMANCE SUBGENRES

Even if you don't write romance, it's helpful to understand the territory of the romance genre, especially if you have a romantic subplot. If you write romance, you don't need to read this chapter, but if you don't, consider it a practical survey of the genre. Romance is a vast genre, so I won't be able to do it complete justice, but we'll cover some of the more popular genres.

### **The First Knowledge Point: Romance Versus Erotica**

Romance is not erotica. Some authors don't understand the difference.

According to Wikipedia, romance is a genre which places its primary focus on the relationship and romantic love between two people, and usually has an "emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending."

Wikipedia defines erotica as any literary or artistic work that deals substantively with subject matter that is erotically stimu-

lating or sexually arousing but is generally not considered to be pornographic.

Wikipedia defines pornography as the portrayal of sexual subject matter for the exclusive purpose of sexual arousal.

So let's make some distinctions here.

Neither romance or erotica are pornographic.

Erotica deals primarily with sex but is not pornographic.

Romance is about the love between two characters, and it may contain erotic scenes.

These are important distinctions. Sometimes authors think the sex scenes in a romance have to be pornographic, which is a turn-off for readers. Sometimes authors unfamiliar to the genre think that erotica is no different than porn, which is also a turn-off to erotica readers.

Romance is love between two characters; that love may be innocent and sweet, or it may be hot and erotic, or it may fall somewhere between.

## **Contemporary Romance**

Contemporary romance takes place in the modern world. It may take place in a real city or town, or a fictional place based on a real city or town. This romance feels like it could happen next door—it has modern heroes with modern problems, modern technology, and the story is especially relatable because it's contemporary.

In a contemporary romance, heroines have careers. They're good at something, such as art, or photography, or running a business. Contemporary romance is an umbrella for many subgenres such as cowboy romance, baby love, medical love, and more. Those subgenres are exactly what they sound like!

Contemporary romance has the potential to become dated with time, but that doesn't stop its enduring popularity.

Famous examples of contemporary romance:

- *Pride & Prejudice* by Jane Austen
- *The Sullivans* series by Bella Andre
- *Anything* by Nora Roberts (not J.D. Robb) or Debbie Macomber

## **Historical Romance**

Historical romance is romance that takes place in a historical setting.

Historical romance, like contemporary romance, is a big umbrella. In my opinion, at the time of this writing, anything that takes place before the 2000s is typically considered to be historical. Anything after that is usually contemporary, but everyone has differing opinions on what constitutes historical and not.

Everyone agrees that ancient Rome, ancient Egypt, and ancient Greece are *definitely* historical. So are Victorian England, and World Wars I and II.

Historical romance is vast, and any time period is fair game. Sometimes certain time periods have strict rules. For example, Regency romances take place during the Regency period in England, and there are certain things the author can and cannot do. Readers expect adherence to the rules.

With historical romance, readers feel like they're in a time machine. Add in a dash of wish-fulfillment, the potential for

authors to explore lesser known historical times, and you have endless opportunities in the genre.

Famous examples of historical romance:

- *Outlander* series by Diana Gabaldon
- Regency romances by Georgette Heyer
- Historical romances by Lisa Kleypas

## **Paranormal Romance**

According to Wikipedia, paranormal romance focuses on romantic love and includes elements beyond the range of scientific explanation, blending together themes from the speculative fiction genres of fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Paranormal romance is also a vast umbrella.

The most popular form of paranormal romance takes place in a contemporary setting, usually in a city. It shares commonality with urban fantasy, though they are not the same. It features supernatural creatures such as werewolves, vampires, and shapeshifters. It may also feature witches, wizards, and psychics.

I spoke with a traditionally published, paranormal romance writer who described the difference between urban fantasy and paranormal romance. She said that a lot of people think that urban fantasy focuses on the action and paranormal romance focuses on the romance, but it's more like a sliding scale. Some paranormal romance has just as much action as urban fantasy, if not more!

Famous examples of paranormal romance:

- *Sookie Stackhouse* series by Charlaine Harris
- *Guild Hunter* series by Nalini Singh
- *Twilight* series by Stephanie Meyer

## Reverse Harem

Reverse harem is the newest of the genres in this chapter, and it has taken the romance world by storm.

According to Wikipedia, harem literature is a work focused on polygynous or polyandrous relationships, where a protagonist is surrounded by or more androphilic or gynephilic love interests or sexual partners (in plain terms, it's when a protagonist has multiple suitors of the same or opposite sex).

Historically, a male was the head of a harem. In a reverse harem, a female is the head of the harem, and multiple men are vying for her attention.

Famous examples:

- *Curse of the Gods* series by Jaymin Eve
- *Dragon's Gift* series by Jasmine Walt and May Sage
- *Fallen University* series by Callie Rose and Lia Holland

There are plenty more subgenres of romance to explore, but hopefully, this chapter gave you a good idea of how diverse the romance genre can be.

## HOW TO WRITE BETTER DIALOGUE

Dialogue is one of the core skills every author needs to learn. Every novel has it. If you stripped out narrative and action from most novels, I bet anywhere from 25-30 percent would be dialogue, maybe more. That's one-third of your book!

The quick tips in this chapter are common-sense advice I've learned over the years after writing over 30 novels.

### **The ABC of Dialogue: Always Be Clear**

This is a basic tip, but always be clear who is speaking with your dialogue. Readers can get confused, especially if there are several characters in a room in conversation. Never let the reader guess. Always make it clear.

When a new character starts speaking, hit the return key. Give each character their own space for dialogue and don't let two characters share the same paragraph if they're speaking. That'll confuse your readers.

## **He Said, She Said for the Win**

Use he said, she said, he asked, or she asked. Make those the dialogue tags you use most of the time. The words said and asked are invisible; readers never question them. However, when you use words like interjected or exclaimed, readers notice but not in a good way. This is a garden-variety tip, but look at the books of mega bestsellers and see how frequently they use said and asked, and then you'll understand why this tip is so common.

## **Observe the Restaurant Rule**

This tip is rooted in everyday experience. Think about the last time you went to a restaurant with another person. The host or hostess probably welcomed you and led you to your table. The waiter probably followed up shortly after and placed menus and water on the table and asked you what you wanted to drink. After ordering, you and the other person probably started a conversation. A few minutes later, the waiter returned, interrupting you briefly to take your order. Then, once the waiter left, you continued your conversation until the food arrived. And then, occasionally while you ate, the waiter returned asking you if everything was okay and if you needed anything. And finally, the waiter dropped the bill off as you were finishing up your meal.

The restaurant rule indicates that something should break up your characters' conversation. Maybe the characters are doing something while they're talking (always a good idea). Or they're having a conversation and get interrupted by something.

However you do it is up to you, but just like a waiter interrupts a conversation in real life, so too will *something* interrupt your characters' conversations.

## **Be Careful with Accents**

Accents can be a major turn-off for readers. Characters with thick accents may be difficult to understand or annoying. Therefore, be cautious with your use of accents.

I've always found it effective to sprinkle in the accent enough for readers to get the point. They're going to be hearing your character in their heads, so you want to color the voice just a little and let their minds take care of the rest. If your character has a Cajun accent, maybe that means for every other line of dialogue, you give the reader a hint of the accent, and ramp up the accent if the character is really excited or upset. I can't remember who said it, but there was an Irish actress on a talk show once who said that she "trained away" her Irish accent, but it comes back whenever she stubs her toe. I always thought that was a great way to think about accents.

## **Listen to People in Real Life and Focus on the Words They Use**

I've recommended a few times to be a student of people in this book. It's one of my most important tips. Listen to people. Collect the words they use. Sometimes a single word can make a big difference in a line of dialogue. There's a big difference in how a Filipina whose second language is English would say

something versus a New Yorker who was born and raised in the Bronx. Accents aside, the very words they use should be a source of fascination. The tones in which people speak are interesting too, and something that you can portray, especially in an audiobook. California "up speak" is a great example.

## THE MAJOR FANTASY SUBGENRES

If the genre of fantasy were a continent, it would be one of the largest in the writing world. It would be ever-changing too, because reader tastes are always evolving. This chapter is a survey of the world of fantasy.

### **The First Knowledge Point: What is Fantasy?**

According to Wikipedia, fantasy is a genre of speculative fiction set in a fictional universe, often inspired by real world myth of folklore. Its roots are in oral traditions, which then became fantasy literature and drama. Wikipedia also states that most fantasy uses magic or supernatural elements as a main plot element, theme, or setting. Magic and magical creatures are common in many of these worlds. That's a great working definition.

Also, in most subgenres of fantasy, the good guys win. A lot of people associate fantasy as the good versus evil genre. That's

not always true, but it's also helpful to add to our working definition.

In science fiction, science is an important part of the story. In fantasy, it's usually magic.

## **Epic Fantasy (Also Known as High Fantasy)**

According to Wikipedia, epic fantasy or high fantasy is defined either by the epic nature of its setting or by the epic stature of its characters, themes, or plot.

Epic fantasy is what people usually think of when they think of fantasy. Medieval-like settings, wizards, magic, and races like orcs and elves. The novels are usually quite large, and it's where the term "doorstop fantasy" comes from. Epic fantasies are often told over a series, so it takes a lot of time and investment to read them. Despite the time investment, this is one of the most popular fantasy genres.

Famous examples:

- *Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien
- *The Kingkiller Chronicles* by Patrick Rothfuss
- *A Game of Thrones* by George R.R. Martin

## **Urban Fantasy**

According to Wikipedia, urban fantasy is a subgenre of fantasy in which the narrative uses supernatural elements in a 19th-

century to 21st-century (or equivalent) urban society. It usually takes place in the present day (or the historical equivalent of the "present" day).

Urban fantasy shares commonalities with paranormal romance, but the main distinction is that urban fantasy usually focuses more on action and less on romance. Some urban fantasy novels may not have a romantic subplot.

Magic, supernatural creatures such as werewolves, vampires, and shifters are typical to the genre. Heroines are most common, though urban fantasy with male heroes is growing in popularity.

Famous examples:

- *Mercy Thompson* series by Patricia Briggs
- *The Dresden Files* by Jim Butcher
- *The Hollows* series by Kim Harrison

## **Steampunk**

According to Wikipedia, steampunk is a retro futuristic subgenre of science fiction or fantasy that incorporates technology and aesthetic designs inspired by 19th-century industrial steam-powered machinery. Although its literary origins are sometimes associated with the cyberpunk genre, steampunk works are often set in an alternative history of the British Victorian era or the American "Wild West," where steam power remains in mainstream use, or in a fantasy world that similarly employs steam power.

As mentioned in the science fiction subgenre chapter,

steampunk is also a subgenre of fantasy. While technology still plays an important role in the genre, it is "soft." Often, there is a magic system that takes precedence.

Famous examples:

- *Emperor's Edge* series by Lindsay Buroker
- *An Alchemy of Masques* by Curtis Craddock
- *The Alloy of Law* by Brandon Sanderson

## Science Fantasy

Science fantasy is as close to science fiction as fantasy can get and as close to fantasy as science fiction can get. You get the best of both worlds! Not only does magic exist, the reader gets a scientific explanation of *why*. Alternatively, magic may be turned into science. This is an interesting crossover between science fiction and fantasy. Normally, fans prefer magic or technology, but here is a rare occurrence where you can have both, do them well, and have an engaged audience.

Famous examples:

- *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeline L'Engle
- *The Void Wraith* series by Chris Fox
- *Starship's Mage* series by Glynn Stewart

**Watch My Fantasy Subgenre Video on YouTube**

. . . .

I recorded a video on my YouTube channel that goes over even more of the major subgenres of fantasy in greater detail than I do in this chapter. You can watch it at [www.authorlevelup.com/fantasysubgenres](http://www.authorlevelup.com/fantasysubgenres).

## THE MAJOR MYSTERY SUBGENRES

Mystery is also one of the biggest genres in the world. Its subgenres have influenced so much of our pop culture. Just to name a few of its inspirations:

- *Clue*, one of the bestselling board games of all time, is, at its core, a mystery.
- People host dinner murder parties at their house where they dress up and try to figure out who among the group commits a murder.
- People attend dinner theaters where their goal is to solve a murder mystery.
- Generations of children go to school for criminal justice because are inspired by shows like *Law and Order*, *Murder She Wrote*, *CSI*, and more.
- Sherlock Holmes, the most famous mystery hero ever, gets a new movie, television series, or book series seemingly every year.
- Detectives remain some of the most enduring characters; readers love crime stories!

Is there any doubt about why I had to include a survey of the mystery genre in this book?

It is worth noting that mystery differs from thrillers. I won't discuss thrillers in this chapter. There is some overlap, but thriller deserves its own spotlight, perhaps in a future writing tips book!

## **The First Knowledge Point: What is Mystery?**

According to Wikipedia, mystery is a genre usually involving a mysterious death or a crime to be solved. Often with a closed circle of suspects, each suspect is usually provided with a credible motive and a reasonable opportunity for committing the crime. The central character will often be a detective who eventually solves the mystery by logical deduction from facts presented to the reader.

Mystery is a character or characters trying to solve a murder. That's the most fundamental aspect.

Mystery novels are also surprisingly long, with 80,000 words being the standard for traditionally-published books.

In pop culture, we think of Sherlock Holmes when we think of mystery, or one of the many mysteries written by Agatha Christie. Or perhaps you may think of The Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, Enola Holmes, or other popular characters who have sprung into the zeitgeist over the decades.

The difference between mystery and thrillers is that thrillers may or may not involve a murder, and thrillers have a clock that is ticking throughout the narrative. The pacing in thrillers is often faster, whereas mystery takes its time.

The difference between mystery and crime fiction is that crime fiction involves a murder, but crime is usually darker and

grittier, and it *always* involves a police detective solving a murder, with an emphasis on police procedure. Mystery may involve a detective, but it can also involve amateurs. It may also have police procedure, but the tone may be lighter than what you'll find in crime.

## Cozy Mystery

According to Wikipedia, cozy mysteries, also referred to as "cozies," are a subgenre of [mystery] in which sex and violence occur off stage, the detective is an amateur sleuth, and the crime and detection take place in a small, socially intimate community. Wikipedia also states that the characters in cozy mysteries are nearly always amateurs, and are frequently women, with the main character Hamish Macbeth by M.C. Beaton being a notable exception.

Cozy mystery is usually not dark, and it doesn't employ profanity, gratuitous violence, or sexual content. The subgenre's biggest calling card is its book covers—they are usually animated, colorful, and lively.

Usually, the character is just trying to make their way in a non-detective profession when a murder occurs and they find themselves in the role of an amateur detective. For example, the character Agatha Raisin by M.C. Beaton is a retiree from public relations who moves to a cottage in an English village where murders start happening.

Cozy mystery may even include cat sleuths, which is a sub-subgenre of its own!

Famous examples of cozy mystery:

- *Miss Marple* books by Agatha Christie

- *Agatha Raisin* and *Hamish Macbeth* by M.C. Beaton
- *Aunt Dimity* series by Nancy Atherton

## **Furry Sleuth**

Furry Sleuth is a sub-subgenre of cozy mystery where the main character is an animal, usually a cat. The animal's role is to solve a murder, either by themselves or with the help of their clueless owner. This sub-subgenre is an animal lover's paradise!

Famous examples:

- *Cat Who* by Lillian Jackson Braun
- *Mrs. Murphy* series by Rita Mae Brown

## **Detective**

According to Wikipedia, detective fiction is a subgenre of crime and mystery fiction in which an investigator or detective—either professional, amateur, or retired—investigates a crime, often murder.

The main character is usually a detective solving a murder. In the mystery genre, characters such as Hercules Poirot, Sherlock Holmes, and Ellery Queen are some of the most illustrious, wholesome fictional detectives. In the crime world, Alex Cross, Harry Bosch, and Travis McGee are the most famous examples of grittier detectives.

It's worth noting again that mystery and crime are different; someone who reads Sherlock Holmes is not necessarily an Alex Cross reader, for example. The main reason is that mystery tends to be more optimistic while crime can be pessimistic and contain darker themes. Mystery and crime may also intersect with other genres such as science fiction and fantasy.

A police procedural is a story with the detective at the center who has to navigate the police system in order to solve a murder. Police lingo and customs are critical to the story.

Famous examples in mystery:

- *Sherlock Holmes* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
- *Hercules Poirot* by Agatha Christie
- *The Hardy Boys*
- *Stephanie Plum* by Janet Evanovich

Famous examples in crime:

- *Harry Bosch* by Michael Connelly
- *Alex Cross* by James Patterson
- *The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett

## **Courtroom Mystery**

According to Wikipedia, the courtroom mystery is related to detective fiction. The system of justice itself is always a major part of these works at times almost functioning as one of the characters. In this way, the legal system provides the framework for the legal thriller as much as the system of modern police work for the police procedural.

Courtroom mystery revolves around an attorney or team of attorneys trying to defend their client from a murder charge.

Courtroom mystery is distinguished from courtroom thrillers, which were popularized by authors like John Grisham and Scott Turow. Legal thrillers are usually more fast-paced and involve a race against time.

Famous examples:

- *Perry Mason* series by Erle Stanley Gardner
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

## READING SKILLS

Let's talk about ways to improve your writing by reading books. Reading is an essential skill for every writer, and the more of it you do, the better. The quick tips in this chapter will help you become a better writer.

### **Reading is an Escape**

When readers pick up a book, they want to get lost in a world they've never been to before. This is why writing a book about some poor employee who is miserable about their job is not likely to do very well. Readers probably *are* miserable on the job, and the last thing they want to do is be reminded of their misery.

Therefore, if you accept your role as an entertainer, then you can write better stories overnight.

. . .

## **Treat the Authors of the Books You Read Like Mentors**

One of my favorite TED Talks is from an entrepreneur named Tai Lopez. Lopez went from poor to rich, and he credits reading as one of reasons. He imagined the books he read as mentors. Every book was an opportunity to learn a life lesson.

Lopez is a controversial figure. He loves women, fast cars, and money, and his personality is not for everyone. But I like the advice.

If you treated every book you read like a mentor, what could you learn? How might you level up your craft?

## **Commit to Reading Outside Your Comfort Zone**

Expand your mind. If you normally read fantasy, consider reading horror. Read some popular nonfiction. You'll learn something.

I've always believed that reading makes writers more empathetic. Reading outside your comfort zone exposes you to authors and stories that you have never seen or heard before. That is *always* a good thing.

## **Commit to Rereading Your Favorite Books on Occasion**

. . .

My uncle's favorite book is *Great Expectations*. He rereads it every couple of years.

Why not reread some of your favorite books on occasion? What might you learn from a new reading that you didn't see the first time around from a craft perspective?

## HOW TO READ YOUR READERS' MINDS

When you became a writer, you didn't think you'd also have to wear a psychic hat, did you? Surprise!

In this chapter, we are going to become psychics and explore what your readers are thinking. That's right, we're going to get inside their heads and talk about the thoughts that might be going through their minds at every point in the book reading process. By understanding these thoughts on a basic level, you will improve your writing, your book's packaging, and your marketing. Each tip in this chapter is phrased in the form of a question.

### **Phase 1: What Do I Want Today?**

Have you ever stood in front of your bookshelf and asked yourself what you were going to read next? You probably just finished a book, and you probably had dozens of choices.

At this juncture in the reading process, readers are deciding whether they want to be entertained or educated, maybe a

mixture of both. The way to frame this choice is to think about whether the reader wants a dinner host or a museum tour guide. What they want determines who you should be as the author.

If your goal is to entertain the reader, your job is akin to a dinner host's. A dinner host's job is to make sure that everyone at a dinner party is having a good time. The host keeps drinks topped off, refreshes food, mingles, and connects guests that may not know each other. I have always thought this is a great metaphor for a fiction writers' job.

A fiction writer invites readers into a new world, and it's the writer's job to make sure that the reader understands what's going on and what the customs of the world are. It's also the writer's job to anticipate any areas where the reader might be confused and clarify those confusion points before readers encounter them. Successful fiction writers are able to keep readers engaged for the entire book without them getting confused or frustrated. In other words, readers leave the novel satisfied, just like guests at a dinner party where the host did their job.

If your goal is to educate the reader, your job is akin to a museum tour guide's. A tour guide's job is to guide visitors through a museum and bring them from uneducated to educated in a short period of time. The guide receives bonus points if they are engaging and thorough without putting the visitors to sleep. I have always thought this is a great metaphor for a nonfiction writer's job.

A nonfiction writer invites readers to see their reality differently, and it's their job to make sure that the reader understands *why* they should. Readers are looking to expand their minds, learn something new, and in some cases, gain knowledge they can use to make lifelong changes. A good nonfiction writer accomplishes all of these tasks simultaneously through providing a mix of education, value, practicality, and entertain-

ment. In other words, readers leave the book smarter, just like visitors who leave a museum where the tour guide did their job.

Recast your role as a dinner host or a tour guide, and you'll find that you approach the craft differently.

## **Phase 2: Why Should I Keep Reading This?**

Once a reader starts reading a book, they may occasionally check in with themselves to validate that they made the right choice. If they're enjoying a book, they're less likely to ask this question, but as the author, you should assume that they will ask it frequently. Making that small assumption will help you write better because you'll be in tune with the readers' feelings.

Have you ever talked to someone and you can see emotions on their face? I teach insurance classes regularly to groups of twenty students. Whenever I introduce difficult concepts, there's always one student in the class where I can see the confusion on their face. When I see it, I stop and reframe the issue differently. I don't continue until I see understanding on their face.

If you could see your readers' faces while they read your book, you would see similar facial expressions. Therefore, it's your job to anticipate when your readers will be confused, and *just before that moment*, resolve the confusion point. Sometimes you need to resolve the confusion point *after* the reader becomes confused.

Because *you* may be confused about what I just said, let me give you some easy examples.

- The hero encounters a villain who is a vampire. The vampire walks in the daylight. The author has to

explain this immediately because most readers will expect vampires to die or be severely weakened if they are exposed to sunlight. The author can choose to seed this *before* the hero ever meets the villain by explaining in passing that there are vampires in the world that can walk in sunlight. Or, for suspense, the author may choose to reveal this to reader *after* the hero meets the character, but they've got to do it right away.

The moment the reader thinks "Wait, what?" is when you need to resolve the confusion point. If you don't, readers may stick with the story, but if they encounter too many confusion points, they'll leave.

The worst part about this is that readers typically won't tell you why they stopped reading a book. Sometimes even they don't know why they don't like a story; their gut pulls them away from it because it doesn't keep their attention. It's not their job to articulate why they don't like a story—it's our problem as writers, unfortunately. You'll learn how to anticipate their thoughts by virtue of writing a lot of books and listening to their feedback about your books over time. Investing in a good team of beta readers and editors will also help you.

Remember that inconsistency will pull readers out of a story too. If your character's eyes are blue on page one and green on page seventeen, that's an easy way to irritate readers.

Also beware the transitions in your book around the 25% mark. That's when your murky middle starts. Readers frequently bail during the murky middle too.

### **Phase 3: Who Wrote This Book?**

. . .

Assuming you've kept your reader's attention for the whole book, and assuming they *finish* your book and love it, the next thing they want to know about is you!

This is probably the only time when the reader cares about you, the author. Until now, they've only cared about your book and whether it would satisfy their needs. But now that they loved the book, this is your split second to make a first impression and turn them into a lifelong fan. This is why I wrote the chapters on author website and email marketing essentials—your website is going to be the first place they visit, so if you follow website and email marketing best practices, you'll put yourself in the best possible position.

## RHETORICAL TECHNIQUES

Let's talk about special rhetorical devices you can use in your work to keep readers hooked. These devices are ancient, and when you use them, you'll be shocked at how well they work. Orators and politicians have used these tricks for centuries to convey their messages to the people.

In college, I was a speech & rhetoric major. I took several classes on language and public speaking before the college discontinued the major and I had to switch to an English major. I carried a lot of those early lessons with me when I became a writer.

These tips work equally well in fiction and nonfiction.

### **Anaphora**

According to Wikipedia, anaphora comes from the Greek, and its meaning in Greek is "carrying back." It is a rhetorical device that consists of repeating a sequence of words at the beginnings of neighboring clauses, thereby lending them emphasis.

Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream Speech" is perhaps the most famous example of anaphora of all time.

This technique is effective in nonfiction when you want to make a point or stylize the delivery of your message. It's also useful in blog articles. Fiction writers can employ this technique to great effect when characters are giving speeches.

## **Zeugma**

According to Wikipedia, zeugma means "a yoking together" in Greek. It is a figure of speech in which a single phrase or word joins different parts of a sentence. There are different types of zeugmas.

The sentence, "I felt so dirty I needed to wash my hands and my soul" is an example of a zeugma. The character wants to wash both their hands and their soul; the latter is figurative.

Another example of a zeugma is "I took the podium and my second trophy of the evening" by science fiction author Samuel R. Delany.

The zeugma has many uses in fiction and nonfiction. Fiction writers can use it as a stylistic device; nonfiction writers can use it for sarcasm or irony, or for a more formal message. It's a very old-fashioned style rhetorical device.

## **Erotema**

According to Wikipedia, erotema is the official name of rhetorical questions. With a rhetorical question, you ask a question to the reader that can't be answered. It is strictly a rhetorical device

to prove a point or make people think. I use rhetorical questions all the time in my nonfiction. I've used the device many times in this book alone...

Fiction writers can use this technique well with first-person point of view narratives. Nonfiction writers can use it to emphasize their message.

## **Synesthesia**

Okay, this isn't a rhetorical device, but it deserves special mention. According to Wikipedia, synesthesia is a perceptual phenomenon in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive pathway.

An example of synesthesia would be seeing colors whenever you hear music.

This is an interesting phenomenon that we can turn into a rhetorical device for both fiction and nonfiction; writers of both genres can use synesthesia in the five senses to help readers see a world better.

## **Semicolon**

The semicolon is an endangered species. One day, it'll be mentioned in the same sentence as the dodo and the Tasmanian tiger; the Cooksonia flower and the Franklin tree; and the Whig and Federalist political parties in the United States.

Many writers and editors have such an animus against the semi-colon and I don't understand it. The semicolon is a punctu-

ation mark to help you deliver your message. That's it. Semicolons have their uses just like commas. Part of being a writer is understanding *when* to use it. As an author, no rhetorical device should be beneath you. Use the right device at the right time to convey your message. This is why I believe that authors should learn to use the semicolon when they need it.

## LOST LITERARY FORMS

In this chapter, we're going to explore lost literary forms that used to be popular but have become nearly extinct. You might be able to bring these back and breathe new life into them. Today, they're stodgy old literary forms, but tomorrow, they could be cutting edge devices to help you spread your message.

### **Epistolary Works**

According to Wikipedia, an epistolary novel is a novel written as a series of documents.

The "documents" that comprise an epistolary book can be newspaper articles, letters, or even emails and blog articles.

One of the most famous novels of all time, *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, is an epistolary novel. It's told through a series of letters.

While they're seen as somewhat of a gimmick today, I've always thought that epistolary novels could make a comeback. I wrote a short story called "Staff Meeting" that is a chatroom

transcript of a conversation among forum moderators badmouthing the admin, only to find out that one of the moderators is a sham name for the admin himself, and he's been spying on them the whole time. It was a fun nod to the tradition that *Dracula* created.

## **The Formal Nonfiction Essay**

No, I'm not referring to the five-paragraph essay that your teacher made you write in high school. The essay used to be a significant literary form, and how people in prior centuries got their news and formulated their opinions about the world.

According to Wikipedia, "an essay is a piece of writing that gives the author's own argument, and are classified as formal or informal. Formal essays are characterized by "serious purpose, dignity, logical organization, [and] length," whereas the informal essay is characterized by "the personal element (self-revelation, individual tastes and experiences, [and] confidential manner), humor, graceful style, rambling structure, unconventionality or novelty of theme," etc."

You'll be pleased to know that the informal essay is still very much alive. In many respects, personal blogging is an evolution of the informal essay. There are also writers who write deeply personal essay books. Two famous examples for writers would be *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott, or *On Writing* by Stephen King.

The formal essay, however, is less popular and mostly survives in academia and literary magazines. A famous example of a formal essay in the writing world is "Politics and the English Language" by George Orwell, a famous essay that explores the

dangers of politics and the English language. Orwell's work embodies the spirit of the formal essay—it's a short nonfiction work that passionately argues in favor of something.

Authors like Orwell, Mark Twain, G.K. Chesterton, and T.S. Eliot were as revered for their essays as they were their fiction works in their times.

One could argue that blogs, or even talking head pundit shows on places like YouTube are spiritual successors of the formal essay, but I don't think so. There's something special about this literary form that just doesn't exist in today's society. It's only a matter of time before it makes a comeback—at some point, people of the Internet era will rediscover it and find a way to reimagine it so that it again becomes a force for intellectual conversations.

## **Multimedia Content**

Unlike the other forms in this chapter, this one never gained traction.

According to Wikipedia, "multimedia is content that uses a combination of different content forms such as text, audio, images, animations, video, and interactive content."

Multimedia content can use many different mediums to tell a story. Once, I saw a marketing campaign for a major motion picture that told a prequel of the main character using a short story, a short movie, and audio. It was supposed to be immersive, but most people considered it a gimmick. It was also inconvenient to consume the story because this was before mobile phones were popular, so you had to go to your computer to watch the movie.

That's the reason this particular form has never taken off. Every time someone tries to pull it off, people don't take it seriously. But as our society becomes more interconnected, someone will figure it out. Our phones are multimedia devices—it's just a matter of time before someone figures out how to tell multimedia stories in an effective manner.

## **Formal Poetry**

You're probably thinking: why are we talking about poetry in this chapter?

Poetry has two overarching schools: formal and informal.

Formal poetry follows strict rules. The iambic pentameter that Shakespeare used is the most popular example a formal rule. Formal poets cannot deviate from those rules. The rules involve syllables, rhymes, and other elements that poets have to adhere to.

Free verse poetry doesn't use any rules and is about the poet expressing themselves freely.

Free verse is more popular because it's easier to write, but it would be interesting to see formal poetry make a comeback. There are still many poets today who write it, but it's considered to be a smaller genre than free verse.

Poetry doesn't intersect with fiction often, but when it does, it's interesting. Wouldn't it be cool to see formal poetry reimagined with new rules for our modern era? Just as J.R.R. Tolkien popularized formal poetry in the world of fiction by including it in his novels, I think an author of the future could put a spin on formal poetry and weave it into their work in a way that suits future audiences.

Formal poetry has a reputation of being old-fashioned and stilted, but it's a valid style of writing nonetheless.

## **Interactive Fiction**

The most famous and well-known example of interaction fiction are *Choose Your Own Adventure Novels* by R.A. Montgomery. In these novels, written in the second-person, the reader decides what happens by making choices every few pages. The books evoke nostalgia for many readers.

As a kid, I read many Choose Your Own Adventures. As an adult, I wondered what happened to them. I found that they hadn't aged well. A few indie authors had written Choose Your Own Adventure-styled books—Ryan North being the most successful—but none of the books spoke to me. I wanted interactive fiction with adult characters written in the style of the books I normally read by authors like Stephen King and John Grisham. Also, I felt that the second person was gimmicky, especially for grown-ups.

I decided to write an interactive fiction story for grown-ups. The result was *Magic Souls: An Interactive Urban Fantasy*. It is a Choose Your Own Adventure-style novel but written in the third person, and optimized specifically for e-readers, phones, and tablets. The decisions are complicated and change the story in subtle ways. There's even a real game show the reader competes in. The book was my vision of what the genre could be in the digital era. I wrote about the process for creating the novel in my nonfiction book, *Interactive Fiction: How to Engage Readers and Push the Boundaries of Storytelling*.

I believe interactive fiction has a lot of potential, and while I

didn't succeed with my interactive novels, I am confident that someone else will.

If you're interested, you can check out my novel *Magic Souls* at [www.michaellaronn.com/magicsouls](http://www.michaellaronn.com/magicsouls) and my book *Interactive Fiction* at [www.authorlevelup.com/interactivefiction](http://www.authorlevelup.com/interactivefiction).

## WRITING LIFE TIPS



## PEP TALKS FOR WRITERS

Here are a few messages you need to hear. No matter how hard the writing life is for you, my hope is that the messages in this chapter will lift you up and get you excited about the path that you've chosen for your writing life.

### **This is the Greatest Time in the History of the World to Be a Writer**

Before the advent of self-publishing as we know it between 2010 and 2012, the only way for an author to get their book published was through a traditional publisher. You had to query literary agents, wait years to find out if your book would be accepted, and sign horrible contracts that possibly took away your copyright and limited your production output. Then you had to wait another two to five years for a traditional publisher to publish your book, only for them to drop you if your series didn't meet the publisher's expectations. Publishers would distribute your book to bookstores (if they deemed it necessary),

and your book could get international distribution, but it wasn't a glamorous life. Self-publishing wasn't glamorous prior to 2010 either—you had to pay a scammy vanity publisher a lot of money just to have piles of crappily-produced books in your garage that no one would buy. *Everyone* laughed at self-publishers, and I mean everyone.

Today, you have control over every part of your career as a self-publisher. You choose when to publish your book. If you want to write and publish a book in three months, you can do that. If you want to take five years, you can do that too.

You control your cover. Authors used to never have a say on how their book covers looked.

You control the formatting. Want to put images in your book? Want to use special headers? You can do that, and you can make your book virtually indistinguishable from a traditionally-published book if you take the time to learn how to do it.

You control the marketing. Publishers never did much marketing for books that weren't mega-bestsellers anyway. The marketing they did do was never guaranteed to be effective, and they expected the author to do most of the heavy lifting .

You control the copyright. If you don't like a contract, you don't have to sign it. You have all the leverage. If you understand copyright, then you can control your career in ways that traditionally-published authors can only dream of.

In short, this period of 2010 and onward is going to be seen as the "golden age" of writers. Never in history has writing, publishing, and marketing books been easier. If you're not enjoying this golden age, it's not too late to reap the benefits. Start writing!

## **You're Part of an Exclusive Club**

. . .

Have you ever considered how many people think about writing a novel but never do it?

How many of those people think about writing a novel, *then tell all their friends*, but never do it?

How many of those people start writing a novel but quit because it's too hard?

How many of those people finish their first novel but never publish it because they're embarrassed by it or don't think it's good enough?

How many of those people publish their first book, but quit because it doesn't meet their expectations?

How many of those people publish more than three books?

How many of those people publish more than ten?

You can see where I'm going.

As a self-published writer, you're part of an exclusive club. Just by sheer virtue of publishing your first book, you're in the top 10 percent of all authors who have ever lived. If you publish more than ten books, welcome to the 1 percent. Few authors ever publish that many. If you go on to make six figures from your work, you're in the 0.001 percent. If you make a living from your work, well, you're the rarest author of them all. But the great thing about that last group is that it's growing. There are more authors than ever before who are quitting their jobs and living off their book income alone. That's why I repeatedly say that this is the golden age for writers.

In some political circles, there's disdain for the 1 percent and the very rich. But in my opinion, the 1 percent of writers is a group you want to strive for! It means you'll have a long career.

**Writing a Book is the Hardest Thing You Will Ever Do...But It Gets Easier**

. . .

Writing a book is not for the faint of heart. It takes a lot of courage to sit down and make up a story. But it's fun if you learn not to be so hard on yourself.

The hardest part about writing your first novel is that you don't have perspective. You haven't done it before, so you struggle with the process.

It's like visiting a new town for the first time—you might blow past a stop sign that's hidden in the bushes because you don't know it's there; there might be a complicated and unintuitive one-way street system that gets you turned around; you might miss the hotel you're staying at because it's on a road that's hidden from the highway. But once you spend some time in the new town, you learn how to get around. More importantly, when you visit the town again, you'll be just fine.

Writing a book is the same way. It's just unfamiliar territory, that's all. But unfamiliar doesn't mean impossible.

When you finish your first book, the second book will be much easier because you'll know the territory. You'll understand what an emotional rollercoaster writing a book can be, especially if you're a beginner. You'll know how to put a story together. And you'll be more confident.

So don't despair if your first book feels impossible. It will be easier the next time.

## **Whatever You're Struggling with in Your Manuscript Right Now, It Won't Matter Later**

Stuck in your murky middle?

Written a character that feels wooden?

Finished a plot twist that feels like it won't "wow" readers enough?

I'm betting that there's a weakness in your manuscript that's occupying your thoughts *right now*.

Every novel has weaknesses, but writers are often the worst judges of their work. The area that you *think* is a problem may not be a problem for your readers. In fact, they may not even notice it. You won't know until you publish.

That's why I suggest to do the best you can, and then move on. Let readers tell you what they like and don't like—not you or an editor.

Also, the parts that you don't feel good about won't feel as bad to you in the future. Years from now, when you reread the novel, you won't even remember the parts you struggled with, and they might even look pretty good!

It's like painting a wall. Even with a few coats of paint on the wall, there will always be imperfections. If you paint the hallway that leads to your living room and you mess up a part of the wall, will guests walking through your house even notice the dab of paint on your baseboard? Probably not, unless you tell them. And even if they do, will they care? That's not why they visited you—they visited you for *you*, just like your readers read your story for the *story*. No story is perfect—not even by the mega bestsellers. Read any popular book on Amazon and you'll see that there's always some element of the story that people will pick apart. But the majority of people don't care about the little stuff unless it's particularly problematic.

That's why, if you use due diligence on your part during self-editing, beta readers, a good copyeditor and proofreader, you can overcome just about any problem in a story.

## **You're Almost There**

. . .

Just keep going.

No matter how hard your book is, you have to keep writing.

Think about how many people in the world never finish their novels—you don't want to be in that group. The only thing stopping you is your fear.

There's a great meme on the Internet that I saw once that has a picture of two animated miners digging for gold. The first miner is determined and is swinging his pickax passionately; he's inches away from a gold nugget. The second miner has given up and turned away; he's also inches from the golden nugget.

You'll never know how close you are to success in the moment. A breakthrough could be just a day away. If you quit, how will you ever know? Wouldn't it be the most painful realization in the world to find out *years later* that if you had just written that book, that it could have changed your life, that you could have created an alternate timeline for your life where you would have finally achieved your dreams?

## WHAT ARE YOU GRATEFUL FOR?

The life of a self-published writer can be busy. We have to wear a lot of hats: writing, marketing, business, and more.

Our life is often so busy that we forget to take a few minutes and be grateful for what we have.

After all, we're living in the greatest time in history to be a writer. We're blessed with an amazing community of authors who support each other, even though we're all technically *competitors*. Other industries don't have that.

There are many studies that show that mindfulness and gratitude can improve your mental health and happiness.

What are you grateful for? What would happen if you took five minutes to thank the people in your life who make your writing possible? What would happen if you *scheduled* time each month to express gratitude?

Sure, you may look a little strange, but you'll be spreading good vibes into the world as well as nurturing your mental health.

## DEALING WITH PEOPLE IN THE WRITING LIFE WHO DON'T GET YOU

Not everyone you meet in the world will be supportive of your writing. In fact, some people may be outright antagonistic toward it.

As a general rule, our society doesn't appreciate artists. Ask someone about the latest TV show they loved, and they'll gush about it. Then tell them you want to be a TV writer, and they'll tell you not to do it because there's no money in TV writing. It's one of the most interesting contradictions of our time.

Also, some people feel so strongly against writing that they may bully you into doing something more "productive" instead, especially when it comes to your career.

This chapter deals with the types of people who may not understand you when you declare to the world that you're a writer, and how to deal with them.

### **Trolls**

. . .

Trolls are fools. They have nothing better to do than to put other people down. You'll find them on social media, on forums, and in real life. Most of them are unsuccessful in their own lives, and they're hurting so much inside that the only way for them to cope is to lash out at other people and make them feel the same way. Misery loves company.

The best thing to do with trolls is to ignore them. Starve them of the oxygen they require. If you stop paying attention to them, they'll find someone else to torture.

Trolls just want to get a reaction out of you, that's all. If you react to them, they win.

Ban them from your community, ignore any comments they make about you and focus on cultivating relationships with people in your writing life who matter.

Ultimately, you should feel sorry for trolls. They live a miserable existence and will never be able to escape the demons in their heads.

## **Friends**

There are inevitably some friends in your life who don't understand the benefits of writing. Some may actively ridicule it.

Friendship is about encouragement and support.

If you were my friend and you told me you wanted to be an electrician...if I'm really a true friend, I should know that pursuing that career path makes you happy. It would be my job as a friend to support you, not make fun of you.

A friend also should give honest advice when it's needed. Would you trust advice from someone who is that judgmental?

If your "friends" can't understand these simple human

concepts, then ditch them and find new friends. Let them tear someone else's dreams apart.

### **Family Members (Not Including Spouses)**

You will inevitably have some family members who don't agree with writing as a career option. These family members will express their disapproval, even if you didn't ask them for an opinion. They may also talk about you behind your back.

Your family wants what's best for you (most of the time), but they may not understand you. Often, the person who disagrees most with your path is usually an uncle that you see once or twice a year. When they tell you "how you need a publisher" or "there's no money in writing," just smile, nod, thank them for the advice, and ignore them. Pursue your dream anyway.

More problematic is a mom, dad, or sibling. If it's someone close in your family, then consider having an honest conversation with them. If they don't get it, too bad—it's your life. If you're not old enough to move out of the house yet, respect your parents' rules, and when it's time to move out, follow the path you think is best.

One of my favorite books of all time is *Be a Free Range Human* by Marianne Cantwell. In it, she talks about the concept of "the beige army." Society wants you to be beige—it doesn't want you to stand out. It wants you to be like everyone else because that's what's expected. Whenever you want to live a colorful life, the beige army of society tries to pull you back and make you beige. But when you become successful, they'll change their opinion and say they were with you all along. It's human nature.

I don't mean this tip to be anti-family, but I'm pro-indepen-

dence. No decision you make in your life should be made for you, especially when it comes to how you make a living. That's a recipe for unhappiness, regret, and poor mental health. Even though it's hard, you have to be firm and unwavering in your choice to write books. If you fail, you fail, but you cannot fail if you don't try. And if you don't try, you can't succeed either.

## **Partners and Spouses**

Partners and spouses may not understand writing. In fact, it may scare them. If you want to make a living from your work, that's a lot of uncertainty. A day job is safer. If you have children, you can't blame a spouse for feeling that way.

And let's not forget that publishing a book is expensive. That's money you could be saving, putting toward your house, or your kids' education. Money causes more fights than anything in a household.

Unlike trolls, friends, and family members, you can't ignore your spouse.

I've always taken the opinion that you have to put yourself in your spouse's shoes. Anticipate what they will feel, and do what you can to help. If that means helping out more around the house since you're spending more time writing. If it means finding a more cost-effective way to publish until you make more money to support your writing, so be it.

For example, I spend a lot of time writing, which means that I spend time away from my wife and daughter. But I do most of my writing when my family is asleep so that it doesn't feel like it's as much time. We have family time every night, and I never miss that. I am always happy to give my wife time to pursue her dreams and desires too, which sometimes means writing less if I

have to. It's a give and pull. Sometimes, my wife just needs a day away from the house.

See if you can involve your spouse in your writing efforts somehow. The best way to partner is to build mutual support. That requires negotiations sometimes.

Support your spouse and they will support you (in an ideal world).

### **An Important Message I Need You to Read**

I'm proud of you for choosing this life and for choosing to follow your passion. Few people in the world wake up and realize what they want to do with their lives. You are one of the few and that's rare. But I need you to own your passion. Don't give it away to other people who don't understand it. You are worthy, you are adequate, you are more than equipped to succeed in life, and I believe that with a supporting spouse, loved ones, and friends, you can put yourself in a position to succeed. But are you willing to cut out the people from your life who refuse to support you?

## WHEN NOTHING SEEMS TO BE GOING YOUR WAY IN THE WRITING LIFE, READ THIS

This chapter is spiritual chicken noodle soup when it feels like nothing in the writing world is going your way and it feels like you will never be successful. It's easy to feel this way, but I have some messages that will hopefully help give you perspective.

### **Take the Next Step**

Let's say that you published your first book and it doesn't sell many copies. Human nature is to think you've failed. You may question why you're even writing books in the first place. It's all too common for writers to get stuck in the theater of their own minds, watching endless movies over and over that tell them they are failures.

Instead, you need to take the next step, whatever that may be. For many writers, it's sitting down and writing the next books. For others, it's finding readers or learning a new marketing tactic. But you have to take the next step, even if you don't know what will happen. That's the opposite of human

nature. Your reptile brain will tell you to stop writing and do something safer in an effort to protect you from getting hurt, and it's tempting to listen. But your reptile brain won't make you successful.

Taking the next step is contrary to human nature. That's why it's hard.

When you don't know what to write next, it's easy to seize up. When your book stops making money, it's easy to think your publishing career is over.

But you have to take the next step, even when it's hard. Action is always important. Momentum is more important. Focus on keeping momentum. You can't keep momentum if you don't take action.

One of my favorite YouTubers, Casey Neistat, did a video about how he decided to move from New York to Los Angeles to support his wife and raise their family in California. Casey is 100 percent New Yorker, so it was a hard decision to sell his studio and leave everything he's ever known. He used the analogy of Tarzan in the forest—Tarzan crosses the forest by swinging on vines. Casey felt like he was stuck on a vine, unable to figure out what to do. What he realized about himself was that he had to start swinging again, because Tarzan could never cross the jungle if he didn't grab the next vine!

## **Microfocus**

Navy SEALs endure some of the most rigorous training in the world. It's so hard that many trainees fail or drop out.

The SEALs that are most likely to pass training are the ones who can learn to "microfocus." Instead of focusing on passing basic training, they instead focus on the task at hand. If they're

crawling through the mud in a thunderstorm under barbed wire, they focus on *moving* their arm. If they can do that, they can move their other arm. And then shimmy their torso. They give up any concept of the future in exchange for focusing solely on the current moment. I've always thought that was applicable to writing too.

Instead of focusing on finishing your book, focus on writing the next word. Every book is a boot camp of sorts; they each have their own challenges. Instead of allowing the challenges to consume our mental and emotional energy, we must instead focus on the work of writing, and the writing itself. Then, several hours or days later, you'll realize that you've written yourself past the challenge, and it's no longer a problem.

## **Visualize Your Success**

Whenever you face a problem in the writing life, visualize it.

If you need to, draw a mind map to plot your problem into a diagram. You'd be shocked at how differently you see a problem when you commit it to paper. Mindmapping apps are great tools for this too.

Then get some distance between you and the problem. Throughout the day, when you're doing chores, taking a shower, or taking a walk, or driving, visualize yourself untangling the problem.

No matter what you do, visualize the problem and imagine yourself untangling it. Imagine how happy you will be when you figure it out. Imagine the current you transforming into your best self ever.

If there's anything I've learned in the writing life, it's that if I can visualize a problem, I can solve it. It doesn't matter whether

it's a manuscript issue, a business issue, or a marketing issue—I can solve any problem if I visualize it first on paper, and then second in my mind.

## **Minimize Regret**

When Jeff Bezos was still an employee in the working world, he had the idea to take advantage of the Internet and start Amazon.com. He's often quoted online as saying that he knew when he was 80, he wouldn't regret starting the company.

That turned out to be a very good decision on his part, and mental model experts have used this story ever since to help guide people through decisions. It's called the Minimize Regret Framework, and it centers on one question: in X amount of years, are you going to regret NOT doing what it is you want to do?

If the answer is YES, then you should proceed. If the answer is NO, then you shouldn't.

Regret is one of the saddest emotions humans can experience. Ask anyone on their deathbed what they wish they would have done in life, and you will get answers tinged with sadness.

I don't know about you, but I don't want to get to the end of my life and wish that I had written more books. Unfortunately, many, many people in this world will die wishing that they had become writers instead of letting society talk them out of it.

Minimize your regret.

In any decision you make, ask yourself, in X amount of years, are you going to regret NOT doing what it is you want to do?

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## **Connect with Your Passion**

"What's your why?"

It's one of the most clichéd questions in the entrepreneurial world, but it's important.

Why are you a writer? Are you just doing it for the money, or are you doing it because you genuinely love telling stories and being the center of attention?

Everyone has a different why. There's no right or wrong answer; just yours.

Many writers burn out because they don't connect with their passion. They chase market trends and write books that suit the market rather than their own mental health. Instead of finding a healthy balance, they put all their hopes on writing to market. It's no wonder they wake up one day burned out.

If you know your why, you're more likely to pick projects that nourish you and make you money. You're also less likely to burn out.

When it feels like you can't keep going and your career is a failure, ask yourself "why I am a writer." Maybe you lost your connection to why you're doing this in the first place.

## BALANCING WRITING WITH OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES

No matter who you are, you have to balance writing with other responsibilities: family, work, other hobbies and interests, and more. I've managed to develop a successful writing career with 50+ books while raising a family, working a full-time job as a manager at a Fortune 100 insurance company, running a YouTube channel, three podcasts, and attending law school classes in the evenings. If I can do it, anyone can. Here are my best tips for balancing writing with the other important areas of your life.

### **Balancing Writing with Work**

Work is usually people's number one conflict. Nothing else in your life occupies eight hours of your day.

When you get home at the end of a long day, sometimes the last thing you want to do is write.

My best tip is that when you're at work, be at work. Find a

job where you can leave your work at work. Taking your work home with you eats into your family and writing life, and it's not healthy.

When you're at home, be at home. Find your writing time accordingly.

If you can, write during your breaks or your lunch breaks. Yes, it makes you antisocial, but how bad do you want to be a writer? If you have a group you normally eat lunch with, consider taking one or two days for yourself per week. Little writing sessions add up in a big way.

Also, look for lessons in every job you take. Sometimes you can transport those lessons into your writing life.

For example, I used to be a claims adjuster. It was the most stressful job I ever had, but I learned to do things very quickly. I knew how to cut conversations short if I needed. I could fly through emails like a pro. I had to because there were always more claims coming in, and if I fell behind, I would never catch up. That job was the ultimate lesson in pragmatism. It's why I tend to do things very quickly. That behavior is forever ingrained in me.

There are lessons in every job that you can use to your advantage in the writing life.

## **Balancing Writing with Lack of Time**

Let's address the root cause of our problem now: time. You have so many competing responsibilities and only so much time in the day. How do you balance writing with lack of time?

Dictation is a great way to write more words in less time. You speak faster than you type, so an hour-long dictation session

would potentially yield two to three times *more* words. Dragon by Nuance is the most popular software. It works great on Windows, but it has had a spotty history on Mac.

The only downside to dictation is that if you're untrained, you'll make a lot of mistakes that you have to clean up after your session. It is possible to dictate a clean draft, but it takes time and learning. Some may not want to invest that time.

Writing on my phone is another way that I increased my daily word count. I use the Scrivener and Ulysses iOS apps on my phone to write "in the cracks of life" as my friend Ryan J. Pelton calls it. It took a while to get used to, but now I write books in the backseat of Uber cars, while standing in line at the grocery store, in the waiting room at the doctor's office, and on my couch. Little five- to ten-minute sessions here and there add up in a big way over the course of a day, week, and month. Writing on my phone has allowed me to reclaim time throughout the day that I couldn't write on my laptop. Writing on my phone has increased my daily word counts by 40 percent.

I also write early in the mornings when my family is asleep. The house is quiet and I can write uninterrupted. I also write again when my family is asleep. I use my laptop for these sessions, so my word counts are automatically higher.

Don't let lack of time stop you. You can find ways to restructure your writing sessions so that you can get the most out of them.

Essentially, there are three things you can do with your time: add, edit, and delete. Be thinking about how you can add additional writing time to your day, modify existing time to suit your writing, and delete or minimize anything that does not support your writing goals.

## **Balancing Writing with Other Hobbies**

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It's normal to have many interests. For example, I'm most passionate about writing, but I also spend my free time drinking tea, exploring essential oils, and listening to jazz and video game music.

Writing is always my first priority.

I used to write music on the weekends; I don't do that anymore. I sold my musical instruments to pay for my first novel.

I no longer play video games, and I don't watch television or movies except for a couple times a year, usually when I have a cold.

I've been told that I have somewhat of an intense and somewhat intimidating personality. That's because I'm fully committed to writing in my spare time. It's why I have so many books, and it's one of the few secrets to my success.

If you have other hobbies, you don't have to give them up, but think carefully about your priorities. Is writing at the top? If not, why? What would it take for you to focus on your writing more?

Again, I'm not telling you to do what I did—I recognize that I'm somewhat extreme. But if you're spending several hours a day watching television—you can make time for writing.

## **Balancing Writing with Spouses and Significant Others**

In a previous chapter, I talked about the importance of getting your spouse onboard with your writing. In fact, I don't believe

that a married writer can be successful without a supportive spouse or significant other.

The best way to balance writing with your spousal responsibilities is to negotiate. Agree when you will write, but also when you will *not* write. Agree how much you will spend and abide by that. If you have children, never lose sight of their needs.

Also, try not to feel guilty about the time you spend away from your family writing. It's normal to feel that way, especially when you're writing and your children are doing something fun.

Guilt leads to bad decisions. It'll drive you to stop writing or to feel bad about the decisions you've made in your career thus far. This is why having a supportive spouse is so vital. When you're writing, your first goal is to ensure you are not building resentment among your family.

## **Balancing Writing with Reading**

Ah, reading.

When I published my first book, my biggest problem wasn't marketing it. My biggest problem was squeezing in reading time. I wanted to keep writing my next book so I could improve my platform and income—and reading fell by the wayside for a while. I had to be intentional about making time to read. Candidly, I've failed many times over the years to make reading a regular part of my routine. I read about 20 to 30 books or so a year, and that's criminally low compared to what I read before I became a writer. Reading is vital to improving your craft, and squeezing it in when you have so many other things going on in your writing life is a challenge.

One way that I improved my reading was abandoning print books. Print books don't work with my busy lifestyle. Instead, I

read ebooks now. I also listen to audiobooks regularly when I'm doing chores or driving to work. That's another easy way to get reading time in, even though it's not like it used to be for me.

You'll probably have this problem too, and it's an important one to tackle.

## TIME MANAGEMENT TIPS

Let's talk about time management and how you can better manage your time as a writer. These tips will help you write better, faster, and be more intentional with your time. Most of these tips are basic, but people miss them.

### **Do the Most Important Activities Every Day First**

Mark Twain famously said "Eat a live frog first thing every morning and nothing worse will happen to you the rest of the day." Productivity gurus have adapted this quote and shared it on endless memes and social media posts. The famed motivational speaker Brian Tracy even wrote a book called *Eat the Frog* that explores this concept even further.

Do the most difficult tasks first, and the rest of the day will be easy.

Let's say that you only have 30 minutes in the morning. There are a few items you need to do at some point in the day: write new words, do some marketing, calculate your sales, and

update a page on your website to fix a few broken links. Which do you do first?

My advice is to do the income-generating activities first. Sometimes it's *not* writing. Sometimes it's marketing. Choosing between the two is a topic for another chapter. But ask yourself, "What will create the most value for my readers?" Most of the time, it's writing, but not always. For example, maybe you need to finish your paperback formatting so you can publish your next book—that's going to make you more money in the short-term.

That's why it's so important to get your priorities straight. Otherwise, you'll struggle to get things done and leave money on the table.

## **Just Say No**

Make writing a priority in your life. This means that you'll have to reprioritize other areas in your writing life accordingly. That's tough to do, but painfully necessary if you want to be prolific. If you don't want to be prolific, then do what you feel is necessary.

There's a saying that I love that sums up this tip: "When you say yes to one thing, you say no to a million other things." It's so true. Let writing be one of the few things you say yes to along with family, close friends, and maybe another hobby or two. I know, I know, I'm crazy. Take my advice with a grain of salt if that doesn't suit your situation. I'm not trying to be prescriptive; just calling it like I see it. I've seen a lot of writers come and go in the indie community. Many of them left because they couldn't focus. They wanted to write, create art, play video games, and play in a band on the weekends...and wondered why they weren't writing anything. I'm not saying any of those things

are bad, but understand where writing is on your priority list, and don't be surprised at what happens when it's not number one.

Also, don't let yourself be distracted too much by author communities, forums, and social media networks. They're not bad places in and of themselves, but they can be time sucks.

Did you know that social media companies engineer their apps so that you'll spend more time on them? They're no different than casinos organizing the casino to get you to stay longer, gamble more, and spend more money. Never forget that.

## **Minimize Distractions in Your Writing Life**

Reframe your thoughts so that (almost) anything that stops you from getting daily word counts is a distraction. I'm not talking about being antisocial. I'm talking about little things in life that can erode your writing time if you let them.

Turn off notifications on your phone. If people really need something, they'll call you.

Stay off social media until you accomplish a healthy word count for the day.

If you fight Microsoft Word on a regular basis and have to fix formatting problems in your manuscript, that's a distraction because the time you spend troubleshooting Word is time you could be spending writing. Time to find a better writing app.

If you have issues on your website and it takes you four hours to fix it, that's a distraction. You need to find a better maintenance method.

If you write in a room without a door, your family interrupting you is a distraction, especially if you haven't negotiated when your writing time will be.

Also, keep your desk clean. Clutter is also a distraction.

Be ruthless in eliminating distractions in your writing life, and your word counts (and number of published books) will soar.

## **Write in the Cracks of Life**

My friend Ryan Pelton coined the term "writing in the cracks" of life, and it's one of my favorite sayings when it comes to time management.

If you're a spouse or parent, you don't have big uninterrupted blocks of writing time. You have to make writing time whenever you can get it. We're conditioned to believe that we need hours upon hours to write our books, but that's just not realistic for the modern author.

Believe it or not, smaller blocks of writing time are better than larger ones, and they're underrated. People will often ignore five to ten-minute sessions because they don't think they can write anything meaningful. They want to be in the right mindset. They are always waiting for the right time and almost never find it. When they do, their writing craft isn't as sharp as it could be because they aren't writing every day, so much of the session is spent burning emotional energy or staring at a blank cursor. At least, that's how it was for me when I believed in this myth.

There's a well-documented phenomenon called Parkinson's law, which states that work expands to fill the allotted time needed to complete it. For example, if you are given a homework assignment that requires two weeks to complete, it will take you two weeks to complete it because your brain will reorganize your priorities accordingly. This is why if you want someone

who is habitually late to be on time for an event, you tell them that the event starts sooner than the actual time.

Hopefully, this illustrates why longer writing sessions are NOT better. They lead to procrastination. In many cases, you can get more done in four 15-minute sessions than you can in an hour-long block. Use Parkinson's law to your favor, and you'll be shocked at what you can achieve.

You can learn to snap yourself into a writing mindset quickly. You can learn to exercise in five to ten minutes per day, so why can't you learn to write in that same time period?

That's why I learned to write on my phone. It required a mindset shift, but it helped me take my career to the next level.

## **Achieve Inbox Zero at All Costs**

You're probably wondering why email management is listed in this chapter. Email is one of the biggest productivity zappers. Emails take away our attention and focus, and it's difficult to get them back.

For heaven's sake, turn your email notifications OFF, and close your email client when you're writing.

Next, do whatever you can to achieve inbox zero and stay there. I have an empty inbox most days. A friend told me once, "Whatever's in my email inbox is what's on my mind." When he said that, I became a convert to the inbox zero religion overnight.

An empty inbox means your mind is elsewhere—hopefully in the land of your work in progress!

Use email automation and rules with a client like Gmail or Outlook to eliminate some emails before they even come to you.

Set aside time each day to respond to emails.

If your inbox is flooded, answer the newest email, then the

oldest email, then the newest, in alternating fashion. This will help you avoid remaining buried.

Email management will get its own dedicated chapter of tips, but suffice to say that email management *is* time management.

## RELAXATION TIPS FOR YOUR WRITING SESSIONS

In this chapter, we're going to talk about strategies to help you relax when you're writing. Writing should be fun and not stressful. Do whatever you can to make your writing sessions as relaxing as possible. When you're relaxed, you'll write better.

But first, let's talk about an interesting contradiction. Most people think that you need long blocks of uninterrupted time to write. If you can find those blocks in your daily life, great, but most people don't have that luxury. You've probably got other obligations, like family, children, a job, other hobbies, school, church, and other things that keep you pretty busy. You might be lucky if you can find thirty minutes a day to write. This is why I tell people that you should recondition yourself to learn to write when you have less time, not more. It's a mindset shift, but fundamental to increasing your word counts. However, the idea of writing in just thirty minutes stresses people out. This is why finding ways to relax is so important. Think of this chapter like a spa!

### **Listen to Something**

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Music is great for setting a mood and for getting you into a flow. I listen to music in almost all of my writing sessions. I mostly listen to jazz and video game music, but I'll switch up the music depending on what I'm writing.

I mentioned this tip on my YouTube channel once and one person responded and said that they listen to ambient noise such as thunderstorms, crowded places, or wind chimes. Another person said that they change their sound effects to suit their writing session; if they're writing a historical story, they might find ambient noise on YouTube that mimics the 1800s, such as an ambient market with horses, for example. If they're writing a space story, they'll listen to ambience of the USS *Enterprise* from Star Trek. Both of these were great tips!

## **Drink Coffee or Tea**

Coffee is the patron saint of writers. If you know you're going to write, brew a cup of coffee before you start writing. Don't let your brewing interfere with your writing time.

I prefer tea, and I brew it before my writing sessions.

## **Meditate**

Before you write me off as a hippie, consider the power of short meditation. There are many studies about the health benefits of meditation and mindfulness, particularly for your mental. I sit down five minutes before the writing session and I clear my

mind. I set a five-minute timer on my phone, and I let my mind drift. Sometimes I think about nothing; other times I think about what I wrote in my last writing session. When the timer goes off, I feel great and I'm ready to start writing.

## **Diffuse Essential Oils**

I like essential oils because they smell good. Nothing more, nothing less. Sometimes they boost my mood too. I do not advocate for ingesting oils or using them topically. Please don't do that.

Make your space smell good. It'll help your mood, and when you're in a better mood, you'll write better.

I bought a \$30 diffuser from my local grocery store and I diffuse oils through it for about thirty minutes at a time before shutting it off. I'll run it periodically throughout the day—all day diffusing is not good for your health.

The oils on my shelf at the time of this writing are: bergamot, cedarwood, cinnamon bark, cypress, eucalyptus, frankincense, grapefruit, lavender, lemon, lemongrass, lime, peppermint, pine needle, rosemary, spearmint, sweet orange, tangerine, and tea tree. I can mix them together in almost endless combinations to make my studio smell fantastic while I'm writing. I usually pay around \$5-\$15 per bottle, and each bottle lasts me anywhere from six to eight months, so it's a relatively inexpensive relaxation method that makes me feel good.

My diffuser also lights up and changes color so I like to turn my lights down low and let the diffuser provide mood lighting for the room.

Remember that essential oils are potent products and they can be dangerous. I've heard horror stories about people doing

stupid stuff with them. They're not medicines! Always use them safely, and don't use them at all around children or pets.

If essential oils aren't for you, you could also try incense, candles, or another aroma-creating item in your house.

## **Daily Affirmations**

Negative thinking is all around us. We have to disarm it whenever we can. Consider posting daily affirmations that you appreciate on your desk. It could be something as simple as "Trust the process" or "I am enough." Or, you could post your favorite quotes. Whatever you do, make your space sacred and kick out all negative thoughts. Retrain yourself to be positive, even if you're not feeling good about your writing session. Negativity isn't allowed! Not only is it bad for your mental health, it's unproductive.

It's inevitable that negativity will try to work its way into your writing space. It's your job to kick it out.

All right, I'll stop my new age stuff now. But these tactics have helped me be more productive, be mindful, and feel great about my writing journey. Not all of these tips may interest you, and that's okay—whatever you have to do to feel the same, that's up to you.

## UNIVERSAL TRUTHS OF WRITING

There are some universal truths that seem to be true for artists, no matter who you are or what you do.

I read a book by actor Colin Egglesfield called *The Agile Artist*. Egglesfield is an actor and real estate agent, yet he talks about many things that I've heard authors say. The art of being a creative is universal, so let's talk about the universal truths of being an author.

### **Success Takes Time**

Overnight success stories rarely happen overnight. When they do, it can be worse than having no success at all. Jim Kukral, former host of the *Sell More Books Show*, always used to say he was an 18-year overnight success story. I love that.

Just because you aren't experiencing success on your terms today doesn't mean that you won't. Just because your first book fails doesn't mean your career is doomed. Learning the ins and outs of the writing life takes time.

Think about this way: when you get hired on a new job, you're not an expert overnight. You have to go through training. In many industries, you have to advance through several jobs before you truly become competent. It's the same with writing. We forget that writing is also a career, and building a career takes time.

If you become an overnight success story, you likely miss out on the nuanced learning that will help you sustain your success. Therefore, you're more likely to make a misstep that can be career-ending, such as signing a bad contract where you lose all of the copyrights to your work, for example. It's better to experience success as a slow burn so you'll be more prepared for it, though it may make you impatient.

### **Enjoy the Process, Not the End Result**

Writing a book can be tough. When things are hard, don't think about how hard finishing the book is. Instead, think about finishing your current chapter.

When you focus on the end result, that creates unhappiness, especially if you publish a book that you hope will sell and it doesn't.

Many writers only focus on adding books to their portfolio and their bottom line. That's fine for a time, but there will come a day when you burn out. It's far better to protect your mental health by focusing on the joy of creating, which is hopefully what attracted you to writing in the first place. If you have fun and enjoy the books you're writing, you're less likely to be devastated when they don't do well because you'll be too busy writing the next story to care if a book flops. If a book succeeds, let it be a pleasant surprise. Once you start seeing regular success,

remember to stay connected with the process, not the end result.

Money is not everything. Comedian Jim Carey said he wished that everyone could become rich so that they would see that it's not the answer to life's problems.

## **Be Authentic**

To use a cliché, people can smell inauthenticity from miles away.

If your author persona is just a persona and not who you really are, readers will be able to tell.

There are some authors who pretend to be nice people but who are quite horrible when they're not in public. At the time of this writing, it seems like there are stories every week about authors whose fans adored them, only for it to come out that the author committed sexual harassment, domestic violence, or some other terrible act against other writers, their families, or their readers. Or it comes out that an author harbors racist, sexist, transphobic, anti-Semitic, or other hateful views.

No matter who you are, your true self will be revealed at some point.

If you're reading this, I can only hope you don't fall into the same category as the authors I just mentioned. They're the very definition of inauthentic. In the age of the Internet and cancel culture, people can't get away with things like they used to.

Your biggest problem is ensuring that the true *you* comes across to your readers so that they can connect with you better. If your blogs, social media, audio or video is stilted, then readers may not see the true you. This is why I tell writers to learn how to find their voice early on, and to prepare for an

adventure. No one finds the voice they think they have; usually, they stumble into it, and it sounds much different than they expected!

It's actually quite simple to be authentic. The hardest part is finding your voice.

## **Be Gracious to Your Fans**

Being gracious to your readers is one of the most important indicators of authenticity and sustained success in today's digital age. Treat your readers well, and they'll treat you well.

Around the time I wrote this chapter, there was a meme floating around about Keanu Reeves and how he refused to touch women's waists when they asked him for selfies. It turns out he did it because he wanted to make sure he respected his fans' personal space. So if you see any selfies with Keanu Reeves, his hands float just above his female fans' waists. He got a lot of good press for that, though it wasn't anything he ever publicized. I hope I'm not ultimately wrong about Keanu, but that's pretty cool and fans respect him for it.

You see, when you respect your fans, they love you even more. Readers talk amongst themselves about the conduct of their favorite authors. You don't want to be the person for whom readers say "He's a great writer, but his views on [insert hot-button social or political topic here] are pretty horrible. Did you hear how he treats people at conventions?"

If you write fiction, show your appreciation to your readers. Don't talk bad about other authors, even if they deserve it. Be kind to your readers, even if no one else is watching. Thank your readers regularly.

If you write nonfiction, help your audience without any

expectation of return. Be ethical. Don't spam people. Thank your audience regularly too.

It's harder to be gracious to your fans than it is to take them for granted.

## **Practice, Practice, Practice**

Keep creating. Keep improving your craft. That's true no matter what type of artist you are.

Writing takes a lot of practice. The more you do it, the better you get, as long as you're intentional about improving.

Take two writers who both write one million words each. If one author just writes without thinking about it and the other author tries to improve their skill level every time they sit down, who do you think is going to win?

Somehow practicing among writers has always been underappreciated. We want to be overnight success stories. It doesn't work that way, so remember to adopt a practice mindset.

Practice, practice, practice. You'll never be perfect, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't keep learning how to be better.

## RENEWAL AND SELF-CARE TIPS FOR WRITERS

Sometimes we forget why we write, and we lose connection with our reason for existence as writers. Times change, our personal and financial circumstances change, tragedy and trauma strike, our mental health fluctuates, and we can find ourselves struggling to write, let alone think about writing.

Much like a married couple chooses to renew their marriage vows, so too must we renew our vows to the writing life. Even if you're not as strict and committed to this life as me, it's still a good idea to reconnect with your why. Sometimes your why is the only thing that will keep you going in hard times.

### **Take a Spa Day**

Spend a day taking care of yourself.

My definition of “spa” day is liberal at best: you can take it literally and go to the spa or you can take a vacation or time away from your everyday life. Whatever you do, take care of yourself.

While you're away, reflect on your writing life. What do you hope to accomplish, how have you strayed from your original intention, and what are your next steps once you're done with your day of rejuvenation.

We all need a "spa day" every once in a while. If you find yourself running low on energy, schedule time for it!

## **Meditation**

Some people dismiss meditation because they think it's too new age. I understand that. I don't recommend meditating for hours at a time; after all, you should be writing!

But a five-minute meditation session before writing is a great way to clear your mind. It doesn't take very long. Rid your mind of negative thoughts and let it drift to previously unknown places.

I've talked enough about meditation that I won't belabor it again here, but I believe it is an important tool in any author's arsenal.

## **Go On a "Writing Vacation"**

Lock yourself in a coffee shop for an entire afternoon and work on your writing business. No manuscript work, no marketing—just your business.

Get caught up on your emails. Reevaluate your strategy, clean up pages on your website, prune your mailing list by dropping people who haven't opened any of your emails for the last six months.

Figure out what projects you want to work on for the rest of the year, and which projects you wanted to work on that may need to wait.

Look at your expenses for the year. How are you doing? How much money are you making? Are there expenses you need to file in your records for taxes?

The writing life can be so busy at times that we neglect our writing businesses, so it's a good idea from time to time to take a day to focus on the fundamentals.

## **Practice the Power of Manifesting**

In the famous novel *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho, a mentor tells the main character that if you want something, the entire universe conspires to help you achieve it.

What do you want out of the writing life?

In a quiet room, close your eyes and tell the world what you want. For example, say, "I see myself quitting my job, handing in my resignation letter, and then checking my phone and seeing royalties deposited into my bank account that are double my paycheck. I see myself waking up on a Monday morning in my pajamas at 11AM, the sunlight shining on my face, my wife texting me while she's at work asking if I'm awake. I'll roll out of bed, drink some tea, meditate for five minutes, and sit down to write my next novel."

Manifest what you want and you'll find that the universe starts helping you. You have to do the work, of course, but don't underestimate the power of positive thoughts.

. . .

## **Do a "Spring Cleaning" for Your Books and Your Website**

If you haven't reviewed your books recently, now is a great time to do it.

Review the front and back matter for broken links or outdated material. Fix those typos that you've known about but haven't addressed yet. Update your author bio.

Sweep your product pages and look for issues, such as the wrong prices, typos in the book description, and so on. Refresh your book description and metadata for any books that aren't selling as much as you would like.

This is also a great time to review your website for any changes. For example, if you published your book, but it took Apple a long time to accept your book, maybe you forgot to link to the Apple version of your book. Pay attention to the little stuff. Perhaps you can update the sidebar menu of your blog with a cover and link to your newest book.

Do your social media profiles need to be updated?

You get the picture. Just like we clean our houses, we also need to clean our platforms so that they're fresh and inviting!

## HOW TO HAVE FUN WITH YOUR WRITING

We need to talk about how to have fun with your writing. If writing isn't fun, you'll burn out, and I don't want you to burn out.

At the time of this writing, I've been in the self-publishing community since 2012. I published my first book in 2014. Since then, I've seen a lot of authors come and go in the self-publishing community. Some got tired of writing and quit because they were never serious about it to begin with—these people were the "community lurkers" who love to talk about writing but never did it.

Other writers experienced amazing success but made bad decisions and watched their success dry up. Instead of doing something about it, they quit writing.

Others moved on to other things that interested them, like art, music, or their professional careers.

And a precious few developed massive audiences, discovered that they didn't like being in the spotlight, and due to mental health reasons, walked away from it all, with only a few books to show for it.

And here I am...keeping my head down, writing, and having fun.

I want you to approach writing with the mindset and jolliness of a child. It'll increase your staying power.

## **Are You Working on the Right Project?**

Are you writing the book you're meant to write? When you finish writing every day, do you feel like you're writing the right thing, or is it difficult to bring yourself to think about writing your next chapter?

If the answer to both of those questions is yes, you're doing it right. No novel is a complete joy ride; there are ups and downs. But as long as you're mostly up, you're on the right path.

If the answer to either of those questions is no, and you're mostly *down*, then I ask whether you've picked the right project.

An author's career is a pathway of projects—in an ideal world, every project an author chooses should be one that they find invigorating and educational for them. If not, the risk of burnout is high, especially the longer the project runs.

Be ruthless about the projects you choose. If something doesn't feel good, don't do it.

In your day job, you don't get to choose the projects you work on, do you? Usually, it gets shoveled onto your desk, and you have to figure out how to deal with it. Why should you have to put up with that in the writing life? You *chose* this life, so be responsible and *choose* the projects that mean the most to you. That may mean that you pick projects sometimes that don't have any profit incentive. It might also mean that you pick projects from time to time that are *extremely* profit-driven. But as long as you are enjoying yourself, you'll be fine.

Pick the right projects, and burn out won't pick you!

## **Are You Ignoring Critics and Naysayers?**

If not, please do.

Everyone in society has opinions about the writing life. For some people, the idea of writing is a joke and a pipe dream. These people have preconceived notions of "writers" and they will think less of you for being one.

Society in general doesn't appreciate writers, and that's not likely to change any time soon. Even though it's cool to be a self-published writer these days, being a writer is still out of style in society's eyes. It's never truly been in style, honestly, even though everyone reaps the many benefits of literature.

Ignore critics who say that writing is a fool's errand.

Ignore the reviewers who say you and your book are garbage.

Ignore other authors who talk badly about you.

Ignore the cyber bullies who try to push you around on social media.

My friend Meg LaTorre of the YouTube channel iWriterly said once: "Hurt people hurt people." Only sick people try to hurt others. Writers who are grounded, positive, and authentic don't have to do that because their self-worth doesn't come from other people; it comes from within.

## **Are You Prepared to Switch Gears?**

If a project isn't working, don't be afraid to abandon it.

I'm *not* saying to give up on a project just because you're having a bad day. As I said, every novel has its ups and downs. When you've been doing this long enough, you'll know the difference between a challenge and a bad fit. Sometimes, the best thing to do from a project is to walk away.

I've only ever walked away from one novel, and it was because the passion wasn't there. I also had some concerns that what I was writing would have been taken poorly by readers because of some of the cultural overtones in the book. So I walked away from it.

I've walked away from countless other non-book projects. For example, I create an unusual but effective way to calculate my monthly royalties, and I wanted to share it with the community. However, I quickly discovered that if I did that, I would be entering the world of software development. I didn't want to spend my time fixing bugs and troubleshooting. That wasn't my idea of fun. The *idea* of the product and the *benefits* it provided were fun, but not the thought of becoming a software developer. So I walked away from it. It was the best thing for me at the time.

## **Are You Listening to Yourself?**

There's so much advice on the Internet these days, and the voices of the people giving it are louder than ever before. Always listen to yourself first. If something doesn't feel right, what is the voice inside your head telling you to do?

In the beginning of my career, I took advice from other people because it seemed like the right thing to do. I ignored the voice in my head telling me not to do it. I always paid the price. Once, I listened to someone who told me it was a good idea to

stack a bunch of ads on your book at launch. They said if I bought enough ads, I would propel my book onto the bestseller charts, and if I could stay there for at least a week, the Amazon algorithms would kick in and take care of the rest. This person legitimately wanted me to succeed, and they were just trying to help.

Two hundred dollars later, I threw a bunch of ads at my second novel, and I watched in horror as no one bought it. As I was paying for the ads, the little voice in my head said, "This is really expensive. Are you sure this is going to work?"

I made twenty dollars on that marketing campaign and lost one-hundred and eighty dollars. One or two people signed up for my mailing list. My book didn't hit the bestseller charts either.

There were so many things I did wrong: I took advice from someone who wrote in a different genre than me, and their books were series. My book was in a different genre, and it was a standalone. That should have been a red flag. I didn't listen to the voice in my head, and I paid for it. Learn from my mistake!

## **Take on Projects That Don't Always Make Sense**

The fact that I have a public speaking career is an accident. I just wanted to write books.

One afternoon, a friend messaged me on Facebook about starting a podcast with him where we talked about the books we loved. I love talking about books, so I said yes, even though I knew it would eat into my writing time. The podcast was the "To Be Read Podcast," and over our nearly two-year run, we interviewed fellow authors and even a few bestsellers such as Andy Weir, author of *The Martian*. The show was a networking

masterclass where I got to talk to people who I had no business in a room with, given my paltry sales at the time.

I discovered that I loved podcasting, so I kept doing it. I created a YouTube channel, thinking it would be a complete failure. It ended up being one of the most successful things I ever did.

Sometimes projects will come along that don't make sense on paper. Paper isn't everything. Sometimes the most fruitful experiences and career-changing events stem from something you said yes to that you didn't think would amount to anything.

Of course, there's the opposite consequence where you say yes to everything and overextend yourself, but there's nothing wrong with trying something radically different every once in a while. If you go into it with no expectations, you'll be pleasantly surprised if something good comes from it.

## **Have Fun. Seriously**

Writing is the greatest profession in the history of the world. There's no reason why you shouldn't be having the time of your life (almost) every time you sit down to write. If you can't have fun, why do it? Double down on your day job instead. But if you're reading this book, I imagine you can't countenance that.

## HOW TO SURVIVE THE TIME OF GREAT FORGETTING

In this chapter, we're talking about a time of the year that is particularly dangerous for writers: the "time of great forgetting." During this time, writers stop writing and sometimes quit writing altogether. This term was coined by Dean Wesley Smith, and it describes a time of the year that is historically the least productive for writers.

### **When You Forget to Write**

The time of great forgetting happens because the weather is gorgeous, people are taking summer vacations, and things are so pleasant that people want to just enjoy the season.

In the Northern Hemisphere, the time of great forgetting typically lasts from June to September, with most writers waking up around September. In the Southern Hemisphere, this time period runs from December to March.

When the time of great forgetting happens, writers don't write during the first few months of the time because they're

busy enjoying the nice weather. Then, sometime around September 1st or March 1st, they realize, "Oh. Wow. I wrote nothing for the last three months. Maybe I better start writing again." In other words, all that beautiful weather and nothing to show for it!

It's a shock to the system when you realize your productivity has suffered for 25 percent of the year. From that time onward, writers try to catch up.

I recognize that this is a very *US American* worldview. In some cultures, it's perfectly fine to take a break from writing for the summer, and if you subscribe to that belief, that's okay. However, if you're a full-time writer, you make more money the more you write, so you may not be able to afford to do nothing for 25 percent of the year. If you want to be a full-time writer, you may struggle to go full-time if you aren't writing for the entire year. Again, my worldview is US American, so do with it what you will.

Also, I'm not saying that you shouldn't enjoy the nice weather. I'm suggesting that you not let the weather completely derail your writing as most writers do.

It's also worth pointing out that the time of great forgetting can also be personal to you. Maybe you do your best writing during the summer, but your job is busiest during the fall and that's when your word counts suffer. Everyone has a time of great forgetting, so figure out when yours is.

## **Develop a Plan**

The good thing about the time of great forgetting is that it happens the same time every year, so you can plan for it.

Develop a plan so that once the period begins, you can implement it.

What do you want to accomplish? Do you want to write a book? Half a book? Write your goals down, and make them S.M.A.R.T. That stands for specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, and timely. S.M.A.R.T. goals help you achieve goals more easily. An example might be "I want to write 25,000 words this summer, or half a novel." If your time of great forgetting is June through September, that's approximately 208 words per day. Or, if you wanted to take weekends off, you'd have to adjust your word count upward accordingly.

If you have never heard of the term S.M.A.R.T. goals before, we'll cover them in greater detail in the next chapter.

## **Use the Weather to Your Advantage**

I'm not a proponent of staying home if you like to be outdoors. Use your outdoor time to hone your craft. Watch people. Summer is a great time to people-watch. So while you're taking advantage of the beautiful weather, use it to practice the people-watching tips I mentioned earlier in this book!

## **Set Aside Time to Write and Set Reminders**

If you schedule time to write, make sure you adhere to your summer writing schedule. Missing just one or two days can send you into forgetting mode. If you schedule writing time during the summer, do your best to stick to it.

I recommend setting reminders to write during the summer

months. It sounds silly, but you'd be surprised how life gets in the way of your writing during this time. If the time of great forgetting were a problem for me, I would set a daily reminder to write for every day or week during the time period.

## **What to Do If You Fall Into Forgetting Mode**

It happens. You miss a few writing days, and a month later, you have no words for the summer.

The answer is simple: just start writing. Don't worry about catching up, especially if you're way behind.

Also, don't be hard on yourself. We all have personal lives, and we do the best we can.

As soon as you can, sit down and start writing. Even if you achieve half of your goal during the time of great forgetting, that's a big win in my opinion compared to most people. As long as you keep writing, your word counts will add up at the end of the year.

## **A Few More Words About Being Prolific**

I believe in consistency. Writing at a consistent pace is always better than writing in small bursts. The time of forgetting is the very nature of inconsistency—it wrecks all the momentum you've built since the beginning of the year. If you live in the Southern Hemisphere, it's especially a problem because not writing during the first few months of the year can hurt you for the rest of the year.

Professional prolific writers learn to write no matter what.

They often write every day or they produce the same amount of books every year. They take time off, to be sure, but it's on their terms and they plan for it.

If you write every year for ten years, how many books might you miss out on if you stopped writing during the time of great forgetting? When you consider that every book you write is potential income, it doesn't take much math to see how damaging the time of great forgetting can be to your career over the long-term.

Again, if you're okay with missing out on the words, then fine. But if not, then follow the tips in this chapter to minimize the time of great forgetting's impact on you, if it has an impact at all!

## S.M.A.R.T. GOALS FOR WRITERS

In case you've never heard of the term or need a refresher, we're going to cover goal-setting basics to help you set good goals that will serve you well. In my opinion, the best way to set goals is to use the S.M.A.R.T. method, which stands for specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, and timely. We'll cover each of those categories, but first, let's talk about "dumb" goals.

A dumb goal is any goal that is vague, un-measurable, not actionable, unrealistic, and not timely. Most goals are dumb goals, honestly. Any time you're setting a goal, ask yourself whether it is S.M.A.R.T. For each letter, we'll cover an example of a dumb goal and a S.M.A.R.T. goal for a common task: writing new words every day.

### **S is for Specific**

Good goals are specific.

Dumb goal: I want to write today.

Specific goal: I want to write *words* toward my novel.

However, specific isn't good enough...

### **M is for Measurable**

Good goals are also measurable.

Dumb goal: I want to write words toward my novel.

Measurable goal: I want to write 500 words.

Measurable goals can be tracked objectively. If you write 500 words, then you achieved it. If you write 499 words, then you didn't.

### **A is for Attainable**

Attainable goals are goals that you can achieve. How do you know if 500 words is the right number? Perhaps you can only write 100 words per day, or maybe 500 is easily attainable. The best goal is one you can achieve but which stretches you.

### **R is for Realistic**

Don't set goals that don't make sense for you.

Dumb goal: I want to write 10,000 words.

Realistic goal: I want to write 1,000 words today (if that number is realistic, of course).

. . .

## **T is for Timely**

Good goals also have a time requirement because they keep you accountable.

Dumb goal: I want to write 1,000 words by the end of the day today. Or, I want to write 7,000 words by the end of the week.

## **Putting It All Together**

The S.M.A.R.T-est goal I can think of is as follows: I want to write 1,000 words by the end of the day today.

If you'd like some more help on this topic, I have an old video on my YouTube channel that's an oldie but a goodie. Watch it at [www.authorlevelup.com/smartgoals](http://www.authorlevelup.com/smartgoals)

## CELEBRATING SMALL WINS

In this chapter, continuing on our theme of having fun, we're going to talk about some ways you can celebrate your writing whenever you achieve milestones. I've learned to have fun and do silly things to help me mark the passage of time.

### **Celebrate Small Wins But Don't Overindulge**

I'm a believer in celebrating milestones, but I only celebrate certain milestones.

My definition of a milestone is publishing a book. Nothing else.

Starting a book is not a milestone. Finishing a chapter is not a milestone. *Finishing a book is not a milestone.*

The only thing I celebrate is *publication* of a book. Anything before that is overindulging in my opinion, and celebrating too early. And honestly, when I celebrate, I don't really celebrate...not like a normal person. Keep reading to see what I mean.

. . .

## **Play a Theme Song Every Time You Hit Publish**

I have a theme song that I play every time I hit publish. It's a guilty pleasure and a fun way to mark my milestones. I play "We are the Champions" by Queen. The lyrics are so symbolic of what it feels like to finish a novel.

I used to work for a web development company, and we sold websites to small businesses. My boss who would play "Hell's Bells" every time we made a sale. He'd crank the speakers up and blast the song. When he did that, we knew money was coming in.

What's your author theme song?

## **Do Something Special When You Publish a Book**

I am conservative with my celebrations. Sometimes I'll place an order for a pound of my favorite tea. By the time the tea arrives, I'm already well into my next book.

Other times, I'll stop writing for the rest of the day and do something I wouldn't normally do, like watch TV.

It's better to be frugal with your celebrations. After all, I want to be prolific, so I'm going to write a lot of books—publishing one is a regular occurrence.

Some authors I know go hard on the rewards...they take long breaks, or they're unkind to themselves with too much alcohol. I don't recommend that.

. . .

## **Celebrate Book Anniversaries**

When I publish a book, I set an annual calendar reminder that sends an email to my inbox reminding me of the book's anniversary. It's a small thing, but it makes my day to wake up knowing that this day one year ago or many years ago I published a book. How cool would it be to write 365 plus books and have an email reminder every single morning about a book anniversary? That's fun to imagine.

## **Take Time to Reflect**

On your book anniversaries, take time and reflect on what you were doing when you published the book. What was your life like? What were your struggles, and are they the same? For me personally, it's amazing to reflect on how far I've come in my writing career. Once you've written a few books and been around for a few years, I'm certain that it will be just as fun for you too.

Even better, schedule time to reflect on your calendar a couple times a year.

## AUTHOR ETIQUETTE

In this chapter, we're going to cover some basic author etiquette tips that will help you make friends with other authors. These are kind of the unwritten rules between writers. You'd be surprised how many people break them on a daily basis.

### **Don't Spam Your Work on Other Authors**

Don't email a hundred authors in your genre and ask them to buy your book. That's tacky. Not only will people not buy your book, they'll block you. People never forget stuff like that.

### **Don't Invite Other Authors to Promote You on Social Media**

I get regular messages from people on Facebook asking me to like their pages. The worst part is that I am frequently asked by

authors who are successful enough to know better. Don't ask other authors to like your stuff, retweet your posts, or whatever. It's bad form.

### **Don't Attack Other Authors, Even If They Deserve It**

It's fine to discuss things other people have done factually, but don't gossip or be negative, even in private. You'll develop a reputation.

In today's highly polarized Internet, it's tempting to want to take sides when a famous author does something that divides the community, but resist the urge. It's never worth it.

### **Don't Review Other Authors' Work**

Reviewing other people's books is an easy way to make enemies. I never recommend it. Sometimes authors do this to get early reviews for their books, but it's a bad idea.

Let me illustrate this with an example: let's say that you and another author agree to read each other's books and swap reviews. The other author reads your book and gives you a five-star review. You read the other person's book and hate it. Not only do you hate it, there's something in it that you don't want to associate yourself with, such as racism or misogyny. What do you do? Pray, that's what...

This is why I never recommend swapping reviews. It will put you in a difficult position where you have to make an enemy out of someone, or act in a way that is not in accordance with

your values. Neither of those choices are acceptable. You can avoid this problem entirely by not doing review swaps.

In general, it's also a bad idea to review other authors' books on your blog, even if you only review books that you like. Whether you like it or not, you're making a statement with the books you include and don't include. That can rub people the wrong way too.

### **Don't Add Authors to Your Mailing List Without Their Consent**

One of the easiest ways to make authors mad is to add them to your mailing list and email them from Gmail so they can't unsubscribe. I've had authors do this to me over the years, and I mark their emails as spam and blacklist them every time. It's spammy, ineffective, and the wrong way to make friends with other authors.

### **Don't Be a Jerk**

This one should be obvious, but there are jerk authors out there. Authors have bigger egos than most, but that doesn't mean we should to treat other people badly. Practice humility and be kind to people, and you'll find that they'll be gracious and kind to you.

Being a jerk is also a great way to develop a bad reputation so that readers won't want to buy your books and other authors won't want to collaborate with you.

You'll make more friends as an author if you treat people how they want to be treated.



## EDITING TIPS



## EDIT YOUR MANUSCRIPT INTO NIRVANA

Editing is a different world than writing, but it's equally important. This chapter's tips are focused on smart editing strategies that will help you edit your manuscript into nirvana.

### **Remember the Law of Diminishing Returns**

Many writers edit their books in multiple drafts, and there's nothing wrong with that.

How many drafts is too many? There's no official answer. However, we can probably agree that one hundred drafts is overkill.

My rule of thumb: never edit a novel in one hundred drafts if five will do.

The law of diminishing returns is a financial investment concept that in any given business activity, when the amount of return is more than the money invested, repeated investment becomes less profitable.

A classic example of diminishing returns with indie authors

is with book promotion sites. You can only promote your book to the same group of people before they tire of it. The first time you promote a book to a list of readers, you may see a nice sales bump. But the next time you promote that book, you'll usually see fewer sales.

The concept is the same with editing. There's only so much time you can spend editing your book before it stops being beneficial. If you edit your book too much, you can *hurt* the story by polishing it to the point where it loses its uniqueness.

### **Edit Items in Isolation**

When editing, it's tempting to edit everything at once, but that makes the task more difficult than it needs to be.

Consider editing certain items in isolation. For example, edit all of your dialogue in one pass so that you're only focusing on that. Then, edit your narrative, and so on. When you focus on one thing, you'll be more effective at catching mistakes rather than focusing on everything.

The writing app Scrivener has a fantastic tool called Linguistic Focus that helps you do just that. Select the parts of speech you want to focus on, and watch everything else disappear, leaving only the items you want to edit in isolation. Linguistic Focus is one of the app's most underappreciated tools.

### **Read Parts of the Manuscript Aloud**

Reading your book aloud is a great way to catch errors. You'll hear clunkiness in your sentences that you didn't *see* when you

wrote them. You may also catch things like repeated words or awkward phrasing.

I don't recommend reading your entire manuscript aloud—that would take you a very, very long time. My preference is to read the sections that will have the biggest impact to readers—the first two or three chapters, any plot twists in the middle of the book, and the last two or three chapters. That won't take you nearly as long.

## **Develop a Style Sheet**

A style sheet is a document that outlines the proper nouns, stylistic preferences, and other elements that an editor can use to edit a work effectively.

Style sheets make editors' lives easier. It tells them all of your proper nouns and the correct spellings so that they can correct any errors. It tells them grammatical preferences such as whether to use a serial comma, how to address numbers, and so much more.

Editors who work for traditional publishing houses usually edit according to a house style guide.

Create a style sheet for your book and include it with your manuscript when you send it to your editor. It's extra work for you, but it will improve the quality of your edits.

## **Use an Advanced Spelling and Grammar Checker**

I like ProWritingAid and Grammarly. They're not substitutes for an editor, but they are better than built-in spell checker apps

on your computer or Microsoft Word. They'll help you catch more typos in your book, which is always a good thing.

I did a video on my YouTube channel where I tested the accuracy of both Grammarly and ProWritingAid, and I was impressed with the results. It will help you compare the two apps to figure out which one is best for you. Watch it at [www.authorlevelup.com/spellingappbattle](http://www.authorlevelup.com/spellingappbattle).

## FINDING AN EDITOR

Your editor is one of two important people who will make or break your book. Picking the right one is critical. I've worked with about ten different editors over my career. All of them were good, but some were better than others. Here are my tips to help you pick the right editor every time.

### **The Different Types of Editors**

Developmental editors look at the big picture of your story and recommend changes and edits to your character development and story structure. It's the most expensive type of editing you can buy, mainly because it requires the editor to be more hands-on. It's also an area where writers frequently get scammed. I personally don't recommend developmental editing, but it's a valid service if you hire the right person, as there are good developmental editors out there. You'll have to pay a lot of money for this service, though.

Copyeditors edit your book line by line for sentence flow, grammar issues, and word choice. They check consistency and may comment on story mechanics as well, but that's not their first concern. Their main goal is to ensure that the words you have on the page are technically correct and that they flow properly. Copyediting is less expensive than developmental editing, and I don't recommend that any novel be published without a copyedit.

Proofreaders are the last line of defense where the editor checks for final spelling and grammar issues that the copyeditor may have missed, or that you accidentally created while incorporating the copyeditor's edits. They can also check for formatting inconsistencies. Proofreading is also important.

## **Where to Find an Editor**

First, look at other books in your subgenre. You can usually find the editor on the copyright or acknowledgments page. See if that person is available to edit your work. A (competent) editor who specializes in your immediate subgenre is *always* a better choice than an editor who has a generic genre appetite. An editor in the subgenre will be more familiar with its tropes, which are an important element of hooking readers.

If that fails, use the database of an editing society such as the American Copyediting Society in the United States or The Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading in the United Kingdom.

If that fails, post a job on a site like Reedsy or Upwork to get bids from editors who are willing to work on your book.

I would avoid hiring an editor on Fiverr, as the quality there is not at the level of the other services I mentioned.

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## **How to Evaluate an Editor**

Check how many books they've edited if you can, and for how long the editor has been editing. A lengthy career doesn't (always) mean better.

Does the person edit for other indie authors or do they edit high school essays? Avoid the latter.

Another important note: just because an editor worked for a traditional publisher doesn't mean that they're more qualified. It's definitely interesting, but traditionally-published authors complain about their editors all the time.

How much does the editor cost? More expensive does not mean better. The editor might charge more because they have to pay down massive debt, for example. Or, they may live in a place that has a high cost of living. They may charge more money because of their experience, but understand that this is not the only factor that may be causing them to do so.

Finally, is the editor willing to do a sample edit? Sample edits are an important way to tell if you and the editor are simpatico. If an editor doesn't offer a sample edit, I would pass.

## **What Does Your Gut Say About the Editor?**

Is the editor responsive to your emails? Do you have a good gut feeling?

Remember, you're going to trust this person with the book you've worked so hard on. It's like handing a loved one into a doctor's care for surgery. You better trust them, or else.

You can always change editors if things don't work out, but it's expensive and inconvenient. It's especially difficult when you have to change editors mid-series.

## MARKETING TIPS



## SOCIAL MEDIA TIPS FOR WRITERS

Next up is a hot topic in every writing circle: social media. Either you've got it figured out or you're trying to figure it out. I'm not a social media master. Far from it. My social media skills aren't the best in the world, but somehow I've amassed around 30,000 YouTube subscribers at the time of this writing, so I must be doing a few things right.

### **Develop a Social Media Strategy**

First, don't talk about your books constantly, please. I beg you. It doesn't matter what social media network you choose; there will always be authors spamming their books. In fact, I'll create a new law right now.

Michael La Ronn's Law of Social Media: if you search for writing on any social media network, within two minutes, you will see an author spamming their work.

No one likes the "buy my book" schtick. It looks cheap, and

readers will hate you for it. I'm not saying *not* to promote your work on social media...but every five minutes is a bit much.

I follow Gary Vaynerchuk, an entrepreneur internet marketer, and investor. I like Gary a lot despite his sometimes profane language and brutal honesty. Something he said very early on in his career is that you should use social media to document your journey. Don't worry about monetizing or squeezing money from your audience. Document your journey to becoming whatever you want to become. Open the door and show people what it's really like. That's precisely what Gary has done, and it's why he's a multimillionaire with his social media ventures at the forefront of his businesses.

If you have followed me for a little while, then it should be no surprise that my personal social media strategy is to document my journey.

My YouTube channel documents the lessons of a working writer.

My podcast, *The Writer's Journey*, documents my day-to-day life.

My book series for authors, *Indie Author Confidential*, chronicles the lessons I've learned as an indie author.

In short, I'm following Gary Vaynerchuk's advice, though it's not on the "true" social media networks like Facebook, Twitter, and so on.

If you choose to use the traditional social media networks, what's your plan? It doesn't have to be anything like mine. It could just be to share whatever's on your mind at any given time. But it helps to have a plan, because you really shouldn't promote your book with every post. And yes, I'm using the prescriptive *should*. Few things in life are absolute. Spamming your books on people is absolutely not a good idea.

## **If You Don't Have Anything Nice to Say, Don't Say Nothin'**

As my grandmother used to say, hold your tongue. I've talked at length elsewhere in the book about avoiding negativity, especially against other authors. It's not worth it. Keep your brand on social media positive, respectful, and professional, even when it's tempting to deviate from it.

Avoid commenting on other authors' activity that you don't agree with. It will only hurt you in the long run.

Once, I knew someone who suffered severe bullying on Facebook. Back when "writing on people's wall" was the fashionable thing to do, and before Facebook implemented the news feed, the way you browsed Facebook was to pick people's profiles and see what was on their wall. This person had a lot of hateful stuff on their wall. They told me they chose to leave the hateful comments on the wall as a testament to the haters' bad behavior, that maybe someday it would come back to haunt them. To me, the comments were nothing better than graffiti.

Negative comments about other people on *your* social media network is like spray painting your front porch with ugly, vomit-colored spray paint. It will be there for your readers to see...forever.

## **Pick the Platform That Speaks to Your Personality**

Which social media network is your "spirit animal?"

For me, it's YouTube and Twitter. For others, it might be Instagram. Your personality is probably different than mine. Experiment with the platforms to find the one you enjoy most

and that also nets you the most engagement. Then double down, learn the inner workings of how to be successful on the platform, and try to duplicate the behaviors of successful influencers there.

## **Keep Talking, Even If No One Listens**

A lot of people start on social media but give up because no one sees their content. It makes you feel like you're creating content and sending it into a black hole.

But keep talking, even if no one listens. Even if you gain a few followers a week, that's okay. If you're consistent and create good posts, at some point, your following will grow. Keep experimenting with different ways to reach people and engage them.

When I started my YouTube channel, I had zero subscribers. I gained a subscriber a week during the first few months if I was lucky. I kept creating, even when it felt like no one was listening, and now I have over 30,000 people who tune in watch me every week. I wanted to give up when I had 100 subscribers. Thank goodness I didn't.

Building an audience takes time. Be patient, keep creating, and keep talking, even if (you think) no one is listening.

## **Have Fun**

This is probably the most recurring tip in the book, but that's because I believe in it. If you can't have fun doing something, it's not worth doing. That includes social media. In the next chap-

ter, we're going to talk about social media wellness tips because social media can be detrimental to your health.

If you find yourself struggling to create content that you or your audience enjoys, you're probably not having fun anymore. Your audience can tell. Stay authentic, stay true to yourself, and beware of trolls.

## SOCIAL MEDIA WELLNESS TIPS

We need to talk about social media wellness. Ironically, it's still somewhat of a fringe topic. At the time of this writing, people will still look at you funny if you put social media and wellness in the same sentence, but in the future, people will realize how dangerous these networks can be to our mental health. Social media has a dark side, and it can ruin people's lives. And no, I'm not trying to bash social media networks because it's fashionable. They do a lot of good, but the companies are not responsible about the power they wield in our lives.

The point of this chapter is not to scare you, but to make you aware. For example, on a Friday night, have you ever opened up your favorite social media network with the intent of checking it for just a few minutes, only to find yourself still there an hour later? That's by design. Social media apps are engineered to keep you on the platform as long as possible so that they can gain data about your browsing habits to sell to advertisers, so advertisers can show you ads that create more data about you...As the trendy saying goes, when a product is free, *you're* the product.

On one hand, this is a force for tremendous evil, particularly

during political elections. On the other hand, it's how honest people make their entire living. I myself benefit tremendously from social media advertising and YouTube ads. So...I'm conflicted. You probably are too. That's why staying balanced is critical.

## **Limit Your Time on Social Media Networks**

When you open an app to check it for a few minutes, *check it for a few minutes and get the hell off*. It's hard, but do it. Otherwise, you'll lose entire days to social media. I know I have.

Before I realized what was happening, I can't tell you how many times I'd get lost in a rabbit hole on YouTube. I'd start off watching writing videos, and then somehow end up on weird politics channels. This is because YouTube knows me better than I know myself when it comes to my tastes (sometimes). It serves me content that it thinks I will like. I wasn't aware of this for *years*, and I let YouTube take me on weird rides. Now I'm aware of it. I recognize that the YouTube algorithm serves me great content, but it can also serve me content that is not good for me. Therefore, I choose when I want to let the algorithm serve me, not the other way around.

Limit your time on your networks and engage with them on your own terms.

Another personal tip: avoid social media as much as possible around major political elections. Regardless of what your political feelings are, 2016 taught us that bad actors are trying to manipulate *everyone* regardless of your political affiliation. If you can avoid social media altogether during the month prior to the election, it'll be better for your mental health.

## **Avoid Comparisonitis**

Social media sites are like casinos. They keep you coming back. Instead of spending money, you spend attention. And the house always wins. There are many interviews with ex-social media engineers who admit that the websites are engineered to maximize your time on the platform. It's also similar to how processed foods are engineered to make you want more with each bite. You can't eat just one potato chip, for example.

There are increasing numbers of studies linking social media to anxiety, depression, and paranoia. The 2019 pandemic didn't help the situation.

And we haven't even gotten to the main topic of the tip yet, which is comparisonitis. If you have warts, you don't want social media to see them. You're going to photograph yourself in the best possible light. Same with social media. No one shows their warts. They'll show you pictures that make it look like they have a perfect life, even though it might be in shambles. That beach photo of your high school acquaintance might have been taken just before they had a nervous breakdown, but you'd never know it. They look so happy!

I'm not trying to be overly negative, but social media brings out an interesting aspect of human nature: if people have to choose what to show the world, they're going to show it the best possible situations. Few people will go on social media to talk about their struggles. Some will, but it's not the norm. Therefore, you will always have a warped perspective of what someone's life is like. There are no exceptions to this, myself included, though I try to be balanced.

When everyone around you is living seemingly perfect lives, and yours isn't perfect, it's awfully easy to compare yourself to them and think about how deficient you are. It creates the

urge to "keep up with Joneses" and chase status symbols. It's a vicious cycle where everyone loses, and it's one of the major drivers behind the increasing anxiety, paranoia, and depression that social media is causing.

## **Be Careful with Your Data**

Remember that your data is a commodity, and it can and will be weaponized against you by *someone*. Be it the opposite political party to which you are affiliated or a marketer trying to prey on your dreams and fears, it's going to happen at some point. In the legal world, when police arrest someone, they say, "Anything you say can and will be used against you in the court of law." In social media, assume that your data can and will be used against you in the form of advertising.

If you understand this, then you'll know when you're being manipulated. My goal is for authors to understand how to use social media on their own terms. That Kickstarter ad on Facebook that you're seeing? Maybe it's perfect for you. But tap on the ad intentionally rather than doing it without understanding how the greater forces behind the scenes are at work.

## **Be Positive**

Social media amplifies negativity. Negative posts tend to do better because they receive more engagement and mobilize crowds.

This isn't unusual to social media networks. Isn't it also true that bad news gets more press than good news? The news media

will plaster a serial killer's face all over the five o'clock news; a child cancer survivor who starts her own lemonade stand? Nope, unless there's no better news they can find.

Social media network algorithms are engineered to promote the posts that have the most engagement, not necessarily the negative ones. But because the negative posts receive the most engagement *because of human nature*, they're overrepresented and typically what you see more of. This leads to the impression that you have to be negative on social media to get attention. Positive posts are less popular.

However, your main goal should be to be positive, even if it's not algorithm-friendly. Build your brand on positivity, not bashing others or reverting to the mean, even if it is financially more lucrative. Perhaps this makes me a contrarian, but I care about building a long term career, and I imagine you do too.

## **Be Wary of Groups**

Social media communities are a great place to connect with other people, but these groups are also where the ugliest traits of humanity live. Block anyone and everyone who doesn't treat others with respect, and leave toxic groups.

A typical social media writing group usually has the following timeline:

- A few people start the group, and they derive mutual benefit from communicating with each other, usually by trading marketing advice.
- More people join, and the group grows quickly. This is the golden age of the group. Everyone is positive, the good advice is flowing, and everyone is

happy. Members check the group several times a day because they don't want to miss anything.

- Then, trolls join. Or some of the original members become trolls. All it takes is one or two people to poison the place. Factions form over minor disputes.
- *Something* happens that creates differing opinions among the group. The trolls mobilize their factions and suddenly everyone is at each other's throats. Many of the original members who joined during the golden age leave in outrage. All that's left is a toxic atmosphere where you'll find an occasional tip. But mostly, you'll find pure beginners who have no idea what the place used to be like and are asking questions that the group was never intended for, and you have trolls who antagonize any and everyone who doesn't agree with their agenda.
- The group dies.

I haven't seen a writing community that doesn't succumb to this life cycle. This is why I no longer participate in writing groups. They appeal to human character flaws that I prefer to not be around. My time is better spent writing.

If you engage in communities, do it on your own terms, and don't waste your time in communities when more important things are calling, like writing and marketing.

## **A Great Book on Social Media Wellness**

I highly recommend *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* by Jaron Lanier. Lanier is a philosopher and computer scientist who has been sounding the alarms

on the dangers of social media for years. It's essential reading if you want to understand how social media networks are engineered to keep you hooked, and what you can do about it. I don't recommend deleting your accounts as Lanier does, but I do recommend being vigilant.

## YOUR AUTHOR WEBSITE ESSENTIALS

Every author needs a website. You could get by without one in the early 2010s. It was fashionable in some circles not to have a website.

Now, it's much rarer to encounter an author who doesn't have a website. If they do, at best, they're leaving money on the table. At worst, they're invisible.

It's more common nowadays to see bad author websites. I can't tell you how many times I hear from authors who think they need to learn HTML so they can code their own websites. They think that a website built from the ground up *by them* is more sustainable. Wrong.

Your time is best spent writing, not coding websites. If you're web developer by trade, then you're excused. But every time I've seen an author code their own website, *without exception*, each one looks like it was created in 1999. That's not a good look for readers coming to your website for the first time. Anything you do yourself is likely to be inferior to what you can get on the Internet for free, especially with Wordpress. Search engines will also be less friendly to your hand-coded website unless you know what you're doing.

Also, remember that website protocols change. Unless you're a developer by trade, it'll be impossible for you to keep up with all the security fixes you need to make. Amateur websites are vulnerable to hackers. Wordpress is, too, for that matter, but at least any themes you buy are created by professionals, so you're less likely to be victimized or targeted.

Websites don't cost very much. You can purchase an annual hosting plan and a domain name for less than \$100 a year. If you plan on being a successful writer, in the long term, you'll make far more than \$100 year. Your website is your calling card, so spend the \$100 so you can make money versus being invisible.

Anyway, this chapter contains the five essential elements that every author website should have.

## **Homepage**

This will be the most visited page on your website, and usually the place where all your visitors will start. At a minimum, I recommend including a photo, link, and brief description of your newest book and where to find it, and an email sign up. I'd make those the first things the reader sees.

## **About Page**

The about page is the second-most visited page on your website. Tell your story and have fun with it. This page is your opportunity to connect with readers on an emotional level. They've probably just read one of your books and therefore they want to

know about *you*, the author. Give them a compelling story and a reason why you should be their new favorite author.

Long about pages are fine as long as you break up the paragraphs so their more readable. Include images, audio, and video if possible. For years, I've used a short biographic video about myself on my about pages. You can view it at [www.michaellaronn.com/about](http://www.michaellaronn.com/about) or [www.authorlevelup.com/about](http://www.authorlevelup.com/about). The friendly video sets the tone for the rest of my readers' visit. You can easily shoot a similar video on your cell phone in a well-lit room and edit it on Windows Movie Maker, iMovie, or even a free video editing app on your phone. Find a unique way to connect with visitors to your site.

## **Book Pages**

Book pages are relatively straightforward. There are two ways to do them.

The first method is the traditional way, and it involves giving every book you write a dedicated page on your website. Include the book cover, book description, ebook or audiobook samples, and buy links.

The second method is the trendy way at the time of this writing that I think will probably go out of style, and that's to include covers, descriptions and links to all your books on your homepage. This way, your homepage serves as a one stop shop for readers. Honestly, this makes sense since the homepage is the most visited page on your site anyway. However, I think this trend will be short-lived because the more books you write, the more cluttered your homepage will become. Also, you can't give out dedicated links to your book for your website, which is something that every author will want to do at some point, espe-

cially when you have a bunch of books. If you're doing a podcast interview or a blog post, and you want to send people to your website to buy a book in your backlist, sending them to your homepage is not a suitable option.

Again, this is my opinion, but if you have the time, I recommend dedicated pages on your website for all your books. Once you create them, let the books live there forever and so you can drive traffic to those pages.

## Contact Page

I've already ranted about contact pages, so I won't do that again here. But your website should have one *if* you want to connect with your fans. If you *do* have one, respond to your emails.

Contact pages can be tricky because the most common way to add them (on Wordpress at least) is through plugins. Sometimes those plugins get deprecated and form submissions won't work, resulting in your fans' emails going into a black hole. Or, the form may stop appearing on your website. Be very careful here. Make it a point to test your contact form regularly. If you receive fan-mail regularly, but it stops suddenly, then your contact form may not be working properly. I learned that the hard way.

Here are my contact form best practices.

- Answer the most common questions readers might have about your website on the page directly above your contact form. This should cut down on the number of emails you receive. For example, if readers always ask you what the reading order of a

series is, put that directly on your book page as well as tell people that on your contact form page.

- Always make sure the reader gets a confirmation. The confirmation should be easy to see. It can be on the same page as the contact form, or their submission could take them to a dedicated page that lets them know their message was received. Or, they could receive a confirmation email.
- Set time service expectations in your confirmation. If it takes you a week to respond to emails, let the submitter know that.
- Ensure that your contact form works. Always test your forms!
- Ensure that you *receive* the emails. If your contact form goes directly to your spam filter, fix that immediately. Sometimes contact form emails come from weird email addresses; other times they come directly from your email address as if you were sending an email to yourself.
- Do your very best to respond to every email within the time service expectation you set in the confirmation.
- Check your contact page regularly to verify that it is still working. I recommend testing your page at least a couple times a year or when your normal contact form volume drops significantly.

## Press Page

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This page is optional, but it's a great addition for ambitious authors who want to secure blog, podcast, or video interviews. The press page sells your success and ability as a speaker. It might highlight your prior speaking engagements, your subject matter expertise, or even include videos of you speaking.

A good press page has two purposes:

- To attract press opportunities.
- To make it easier for the press to give you good press.

For example, on my press page, I highlight all of my speaking events—particularly that I've been a featured speaker on The Creative Penn, at Writer's Digest Conferences, and AnchorFM (now owned by Spotify). I also include video of my most recent public appearances so the potential venues can see what I would be like as a speaker.

I also include a press kit, but we'll talk about that in the next chapter.

The press page is an important tool in your toolkit if you want to be a public speaker. My press page has made me a lot of money over the years and helped me grow my platform considerably.

If you'd like to view my Press page in action, check it out at [www.authorlevelup.com/press](http://www.authorlevelup.com/press).

## YOUR AUTHOR PRESS KIT

The last chapter ended with a discussion of the press page and why it is a valuable page on your website because it attracts public speaking opportunities. In this chapter, I'm going to talk about the press kit (also known as a media kit). The press kit is essential if you want to do public speaking.

A press kit is a compilation of marketing materials that make it easier for venues to promote you and feature you favorably. Generally, a press kit is downloadable to the public so that anyone can use the materials. For example, if someone wants to review one of your books, they shouldn't have to ask you for copies of your author biography or headshot. With a public press kit, they can download these items for free and use them to feature you in their blog post—all with no interaction from you. I like to call it "self-service press."

Also, you can give your press kit to interviewers who feature you on their blogs or podcasts. Once you're booked, send them a link to the kit so they can use it for their marketing. It makes both of you look good, and it saves your interviewer time. You'd be surprised how much time interviewers spend chasing down things like bios and headshots.

My press kit has helped me land public speaking events and it has done wonders for my professionalism, which has led to more speaking opportunities as well. In this chapter, I'll cover the top five elements in my press kit.

Also, in this chapter, I refer to the people who use your press kit as "influencers." These "influencers" can be bloggers, podcasters, film directors, members of the press, event organizers, and more. I intend it as a catch-all term because you never know who will reach out with an opportunity.

## **Author Biographies**

Your author biography tells people who you are, what you've written, and what you're about. You probably have one, but is it what the influencer needs? In other words, what if your author bio is 100 words but 50 words is needed?

If the answer is "let them handle it," you've failed.

My secret is to offer biographies of varying lengths:

- One sentence.
- Short bio: three sentences.
- Medium bio: five sentences.
- Long-ish bio: around ten sentences.
- Full page bio: around twenty sentences.

These are just rough estimates. There's no right or wrong length for medium, long-ish, or full-page bios. Chances are high that *one* of these will satisfy the influencer's needs. If not, you can easily use of them as a starting point to tailor it. Doing these upfront also prevents you from having to scabble together an

author bio at the last minute, which increases the chances of typos and not getting your core message across.

The main goal is to create a situation where the influencer can copy and paste your bio for their purposes.

## **Author Headshots**

An author headshot is also a must so influencers can put your pretty face on their website!

I recommend the following:

- A high resolution image.
- A low resolution image.
- If possible, a high and low resolution image in black and white.

You never know where or how an influencer will need your image. The mistake authors make is to only offer a high *or* low resolution image. What if the influencer wants to use your image on their website? A high resolution image won't do because it'll be too large. What if they want to print your image in a magazine? A low resolution image will look pixelated. This is why you should offer both.

I've had people ask me for black and white images over the years, but it's your choice on whether you should include it or not. It only takes a couple of clicks to turn an image black and white, so it's not difficult.

## **Book Information**

If you want influencers to feature your books, then including high and low res versions of your book cover is also a good idea. You may also wish to include attracting marketing graphics that the influencer can use, such as your book next to a mug of coffee, for example. Marketing graphics are not required.

I like to include the covers of my latest book as well as the "greatest hits" books I mention frequently in my public speaking appearances.

For any covers I include, I provide links to those books as well as a one- or two-sentence description of the book. I always include a link to the book page on my website, not a direct Amazon or Apple link. That way, if any of my retailer links change or become broken over time, traffic always flows to my website where I can more easily fix the issue.

## **Talking Points**

Talking points are perhaps the most controversial part of the press kit. Some people swear by them; others balk at the idea.

Talking points are for interviews; they give an influencer a sense of what to ask and why. They exist as a starting point from which the interviewer can prepare deeper questions. Used correctly, they make the interviewer look good and increase the chances that your interview will be on-brand. If used incorrectly, they'll make every interview you do sound wooden and predictable. This is why I recommend that if you use talking points, *change your talking points after every interview!* You'll always have a couple that are your mainstays, but if every talking point is the same for every interview...well, that's not much fun to listen to.

Let me give you an example of a mainstay and a talking point with a shelf-life.

In my podcast interviews, audiences are usually fascinated when I talk about writing books on my phone. It's a hit every time. That's a mainstay—I want to make sure I hit that point in most of my interviews for writing audiences.

I am a tea drinker. I drink several cups of tea a day and I'm always searching for new loose leaf teas. I love when people ask me about tea, but you can only talk about that a couple of times before it gets stale. That's an example of a talking point with a shelf life. I don't want to hit that in every interview, but in the few where I do, it's a nice touch that adds color to the interview.

My secret is to give every interview something unique that I've never talked about before. This way, if someone asks me about tea, I can send them to the interview where I talked about that. That's good for me as well as the interviewer.

Also—perhaps this is maybe more of my ego talking than anything else—think of the power of different interviews over the long term for a true fan who discovers you for the first time. Imagine someone who reads one of your books and then wants to consume *everything* you've ever done. Everything. They want to listen to every interview you've ever done because they want to learn from you. Do you want every single interview to be the same? Of course not. You want there to be something unique for them in every interview so it's engaging for them. Again, it's probably my ego talking, and the number of people in your audience that would want to do this is likely very small, but if you become wildly successful, my hunch is that this little tip alone will make you even more successful.

## EMAIL MARKETING BEST PRACTICES

Email marketing scares authors. It seems complicated and time-consuming, but honestly, it's really not that bad. In this chapter and the next, we're going to tackle some dead-simple best practices that will help you grow your email list, improve your open and click rates, and sell more books.

I'm able to talk about this with some authority because while I have a small list, my open and click rates are double the industry average. My open rates are around between 50 to 65 percent and my click rates are around 20 to 30 percent, which is decent.

With an email list, you'll make more money, cultivate more fans, and not have to worry about using someone else's platform to communicate with your peeps. Don't participate in digital sharecropping. Build your own!

### **Use a Lead Magnet**

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In marketing, a lead magnet is a free item that a business gives away in order to entice customers to sign up for an email list, such as a white paper, free book, or webinar.

In the writing community, lead magnets are referred to as “reader magnets,” popularized by Nick Stephenson’s book *Reader Magnets*.

For authors, a reader magnet is usually a free book or a short story. Lead magnets are critical to growing your email list. Readers “opt in” to your mailing list in exchange for your magnet.

If you don’t have a lead magnet and your offer for people joining your mailing list “join my list and get free updates,” you’re missing out on subscribers. In general, readers won’t join a mailing list unless there’s something in it for them.

The best lead magnets for fiction writers are short stories, novellas, or full-length books, preferably in the world of their most popular series. The best lead magnets for nonfiction writers are any items that add value to their subscribers’ lives that also match the author’s brand. If you write about essential oils and healthy living, for example, then you might offer a twenty- or thirty-page recipe book of your favorite essential oil blends for beginners, with the health benefits of each oil listed in your lead magnet. For this reason, nonfiction lead magnets are easier to create.

It takes time to create lead magnets, especially if they are exclusive to your mailing list, but it’s worth the extra time and effort because it will help you grow your list.

Create an autoresponder that delivers your lead magnet immediately upon sign-up so that your readers get their free gift immediately. All major email service providers allow you to do this, assuming you’re paying for a plan that supports autoresponders.

## **Have a Purpose for Every Email You Send**

Before you start sending a newsletter, ask yourself: why am I sending this? Do I want subscribers to click on a link, reply to the email, or something else? The most effective emails have one purpose.

If your email is announcing the launch of your new book, your goal is to sell books.

If your email is to let readers know that you've started a Facebook community, your goal is to get them to join the community.

Where people go wrong is that they stuff their emails with multiple calls to actions, which leads to mixed results. A laser focus on your goal will help you accomplish your goal and maximize the results.

## **Spend Most of Your Time on the Subject Line**

I once heard a marketer say that he spends 80 percent of his time on subject lines, and the other 20 percent on the rest of the email. Subject lines are that important. Without them, readers won't open your emails and nothing else you do will matter. You can't get readers to buy your books if they don't open your emails!

If you need help with "market-y" subject lines, do a simple Internet search for "best email marketing subject lines." You'll find hundreds of examples.

. . .

## **When in Doubt, Use Short Sentences and Paragraphs**

Don't write emails like you write fiction. What works in fiction does not work in email marketing, and vice versa.

Inexperienced authors tend to write long, blocky emails that take way too long to say what needs to be said. That's not how email marketers do it. Email marketers follow the principles of copywriting, which in marketing and advertising, is the act of writing advertisements that convinces a person to take a particular action.

Copywriting is a completely different skill than writing a book.

Generally, authors write books to entertain or educate. Copywriters write to persuade people to buy, sign up for a mailing list, donate money, or some other action that is necessary for a business to make money. Because it is a different skill, it requires a different mindset.

Copywriters use short sentences and short paragraphs. A common style is to use one sentence per paragraph. This keeps readers' eyes moving down the page toward the call to action.

The best way to learn copywriting is to join a handful of Internet marketing mailing lists so you can see how marketers write emails. Then borrow their techniques and use them for your list. Do this and you'll sell more books.

## **Allow People to Unsubscribe at Any Time**

Professional writers use email marketing services to email their subscribers. I use the word "professional" as a synonym for

"responsible." Please don't use your email client like Outlook, Gmail, or Yahoo to send mail to your newsletter subscribers. Not only will you anger readers, you'll probably be in violation of your country's spam laws.

Email marketing best practices dictate that subscribers must have the ability to unsubscribe from an email newsletter at any time. There should be an unsubscribe button or link at the bottom of every email, and it should be clear and conspicuous. A statement explaining to subscribers why they joined the list should also accompany the link—this statement is needed because sometimes authors may not email their mailing lists for a long time and readers may forget that they joined a mailing list.

Give subscribers the ability to unsubscribe if they choose. No one likes to lose subscribers, but it's normal. Subscribers come and go. Most importantly, you'll be respecting your readers and complying with the laws in your state or country.

## **Use a Swipe File**

Any time you encounter a subject line or a line of copy that makes you click or join someone else's mailing list, write it down because you just proved that the copy worked!

Copywriters do this all the time, and the copy they collect is called a "swipe file." Whenever a copywriter needs some inspiration, they refer to their swipe file.

There's a common adage in the marketing industry that says "good copy is meant to be stolen." I never recommend taking people's lines wholesale, but there's nothing that says you can't use a line as a starting point and tailor it for your needs.

Over time, as you build your swipe file, you'll figure out the lines that are most effective for getting readers to open your emails and take the actions you want them to take.

The next chapter has some email subject lines you can use in your own marketing.

## ADVANCED EMAIL MARKETING TACTICS

In the last chapter, we talked about email marketing best practices to improve your email marketing skills. In this chapter, we're going to explore some next-level tactics that work extremely well in getting people to open your emails and take action.

### **Great Email Subject Lines You Can Steal**

In the last chapter, we talked about writing down great email marketing subject lines into a swipe file. Here are a few subject lines that will likely convert for you well, with a rationale.

*Will I see you tonight?* This subject line is a good for webinars or events such as book launch parties. It appeals to readers' human nature of not wanting to miss out. They're going to think "Wait. Did I commit to this and forget about it?" Then they'll click.

*You're going to love this one.* I've used this one quite a bit in my marketing. It works because it makes the reader think "love

what?" It's also a cozy subject line that assumes that you and the reader are friends. It's a great line to use on a list full of subscribers who have been with you for a while.

*New release by [Author name].* This is a matter-of-fact subject line that advertises exactly what the reader is going to get: a new book release. I've used this subject line several times and I've received mixed results. Sometimes it does really well; other times readers don't bite. Try it and see if it works for you.

*Why I am taking a break from writing.* This is a dramatic subject line that is guaranteed to increase your open rate, but don't abuse it. Use it only when it's true. A great example of this is if you are taking the summer off to recharge your batteries. Be sure to let readers know that your hiatus isn't forever!

*How I lost \$1,000 of my mom's money marketing my first book.* Aside from being humorous, this is a great line that will intrigue your readers. They'll click because they'll want to hear the story.

The important thing to remember about subject lines is that your email has to deliver on your subject line. Don't use a subject line just to catch people's attention. They might open your email, but they'll probably unsubscribe too.

## **The Oldest Trick in the Book: The Video Play Button**

Any time you want subscribers to click on a video, avoid the urge to give a link. Instead, if you can, get the thumbnail of the video and then find a public domain play button. Superimpose the play button in the middle of the thumbnail. Make subscribers click on *that*.

People can't resist clicking on play buttons. Even though

they can't play videos inside their emails, they'll click it anyway. At that point, by the time they realize it, the video will have loaded in a browser window and they won't care.

This trick works like magic.

## **Use Buttons**

People also can't resist clicking on buttons. Give them big, colorful buttons to click for your call to action instead of hyperlinks. Buttons are more attractive on mobile devices too. Experiment with colors and button sizes to see what works best for you.

## **Mix Your Links**

In addition to buttons, consider *also* using hyperlinks for the same call to action. For example, the first time you tell your audience to take the action needed, use a button. Then, at the bottom of your email, possibly in a postscript, paste the link. The more readers see your link, the more likely they'll click it. Use email analytics tracking to see whether your buttons or links receive more clicks, and optimize accordingly.

My experience has been that some readers click the hyperlink at the bottom of my email, probably because it's the last thing they see. Therefore, I view this as maximizing the real estate in my email.

## **Use Postscripts**

. . .

At the bottom of your email, consider using postscripts.

Here's a sample postscript: "P.S. In case you need the link to the book again, you can buy it here: [www.authorlevelup.com/atlas](http://www.authorlevelup.com/atlas)."

I don't have any scientific data on why postscripts work, but I think it's because of nostalgia. If you've ever had a pen pal or received a handwritten letter from somewhere, you probably read the postscript warmly. Also, people use postscripts in their personal emails to each other all the time. A postscript in a newsletter is a nice personal touch that evokes that nostalgia.

You can go overboard with a postscript. Let me give you an example.

P.S. In case you need the link to the book again, you can buy it here: [www.authorlevelup.com/atlas](http://www.authorlevelup.com/atlas).

P.P.S. You can also follow me on Facebook.

P.P.P.S Thanks for being on my list. I appreciate it.

The example above is obnoxious. I have used double postscripts before, but I had a specific reason for doing so. Using a postscript for postscript's sake is a bad idea.

One of the best postscripts I've ever seen gave readers a coupon code to use when they click the button above it. The marketer wrote "P.S. As a thank you for being a loyal subscriber, use the coupon code THANKYOU at checkout to receive 20% off the course. See? It pays to read these emails all the way to the end!"

He didn't mention the discount *anywhere else* in the email. That is a brilliant use of a postscript.

Aim to be creative. Don't use postscripts every time—that will make them more effective when you do.

. . .

## Practice List Hygiene

Email list hygiene is purging people from the list who no longer engage with your newsletters.

Sometimes people join your mailing list but stop engaging with you over time. Use your email analytics to find these people. You need to address them. When you consider that most major email marketing services charge by the subscriber, inactive subscribers can be costly.

Be ruthless about removing anyone on your list who does not regularly engage with your content. But...two words of caution.

First, what constitutes "regular" engagement? There's no industry standard number. It depends on how often you send emails. But, in my opinion, if you send a monthly email, and a subscriber hasn't opened your last six emails, it's probably time to do something about that person.

Second, beware that your email marketing service provider may not have 100 percent accurate data. Email tracking is an imprecise science because these companies can't always capture when someone opens your email or clicks on a link in it. This is due to a number of different factors. So it's a good rule of thumb to remember that whatever your analytics *say* your open and click rates are, the numbers are probably slightly higher. If you accept this premise, then you must also accept that just because your dashboard says Suzie Smith hasn't opened your emails in six months, it may not be true.

Once, I assumed my email dashboards were accurate and I started removing people from my list. Then I received emails from readers asking why they hadn't heard from me—the very same people I removed. Ouch. I'll never make that mistake again.

There are multiple ways to handle this problem.

One way is to give the person or group of people one last chance; if they don't open your newest newsletter, you can remove them. But as I said before, that can be risky.

Another way is to send a targeted email only the inactive subscribers that says you're doing some maintenance and that anyone who doesn't click a link in the email will be purged. You can make the link go to your website—the destination doesn't matter. After a week, run a report to figure out who didn't click the link. Purge those people.

Removing people from your email list will improve your open and click rates, and it will ensure that you are maximizing the cost of your email list by sending emails only to engaged subscribers.



## BUSINESS TIPS



## FUNDAMENTAL MINDSET TIPS FOR INDIE WRITERS

Mindset is important in life. It's important for authors too. So much in the writing life is about fighting with yourself. Learning how to write isn't easy, but it's not hard. Facing your own self-doubt? That's hard.

Here are some basic writer mindset things that are fundamental but important to building a writing career in today's digital world of publishing. Adopting these mindsets have enabled many authors to quit their jobs and make a living with their work.

### **You are the Creative Director of Your Career**

This saying is coined by Orna Ross, founder and director of The Alliance of Independent Authors. You have complete control over your career, not anyone else.

You don't have to worry about publishers, literary agents, or bad contracts. You make your own future, and your luck.

If you want to distribute your book to a certain store, you

can. If you want to make a graphic novel, you can (assuming you have the money to pay an artist). If you don't want to sign a bad contract because it grabs copyrights without compensating you for them, then you don't have to sign it.

You're in complete control. How powerful and empowering it is to know that from the moment you wake up to the moment you go to sleep *every day*, every decision you make is your own!

Yet that's scary for some people because, while you are responsible for your success, you're also responsible for your failure.

I choose to embrace the freedom that my choices provide, not the fear of what may happen if I'm not successful. How about you?

## **Books are Streams of Income**

I first heard this tip from Joanna Penn, and I loved it ever since.

Writers love to think about their books as *books*. After all, it's the baby we spend months or even years of blood, sweat, and tears on.

Books *are* books. But when we write "The End," we have to shift to thinking of them as products.

Products are something you sell. Products make you money. The more products you sell, the more money you make, and the more money you make, the more likely you are to write for a living, if you so choose.

It's not easy to think of books as products, but it's a fundamental mindset shift. Also, your book isn't just one product; it's many different products. The ebook and paperback are separate products; each has its own unique audience. If your book is

available in ebook only, you're missing out on all those readers who only read print.

Every format is a product. Ebook, trade paperback, hardcover, audiobook, graphic novel, film, television, and more. You could even divide those into their own sub-products. For example, you might create a limited-edition leather-bound hardcover in *addition* to an existing hardcover that you sell to your hard-core fans. Or, you might create a professionally-narrated audiobook, an audio drama, and an AI-narrated audiobook using your voice—all from the same audiobook!

And don't forget alternative streams of income such as Patreon, PayPal tips, affiliate links, public-speaking income, merchandise, and more! You can turn one book into a monster river of money.

## **Be Everywhere**

You can sell each your products at many different places: Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, Apple, Google Play, ebook aggregators like Draft2Digital, physical book stores, libraries, direct on your website, and any other place you can dream of. Each of those places is a stream of income. You might only make a couple dollars on some of the small retailers, but over time, those income streams add up into a mighty river, especially if you keep seeking new streams. Multiply, multiply, multiply those streams of income, and keep creating new products!

The more places your book is available, the more readers can buy it. This is such a basic concept, but many authors choose to keep their books in Amazon's KDP Select program. There's nothing wrong with KDP Select, but it's just one slice of one market—bargain-hunting readers in the United States, and

to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom. There's a great big world of readers out there if you dare to engage them, but it can take a long time to build a platform outside of Amazon, so it's best to start early.

See why you shouldn't think of your book as your "baby" anymore? If anything, call it your "baby product." That's more accurate, and it'll make you more money.

## Heinlein's Rules

The science fiction writer Robert A. Heinlein is famous for his books *Starship Troopers*, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, but in the writing community, he's also famous for a set of five rules he wrote in a 1947 essay about writing. These rules have captivated writers ever since because they're so hard to follow. While they were intended for short stories, they can easily be applied to books.

Heinlein's rules are as follows:

1. *You must write.* No telling people you're going to be writer and then not doing it. You have to put your butt in the chair, put your fingers on the keyboard, and get words on the screen.

2. *You must finish what you write.* No letting your critical voice stop you from finishing your work-in-progress. If you write a single word toward a new book, you *must* finish it. Too bad if you lose your motivation. Finish it.

3. *You must not rewrite except to editorial demand.* This is the most infamous rule. Many people interpret it as you must not rewrite at all, but that's not what Heinlein meant. He meant you must not rewrite unless a magazine editor tells you to rewrite it to meet the magazine's demands. In that case, if you

rewrite it, you're going to sell the story. Heinlein lived in a different time, but we can apply his advice to books too. If you choose the right editor, you should be able to trust their advice—rewriting a whole book is not recommended, but if editorial demand suggest you can strengthen a scene by following steps X, Y, and Z, then follow those steps. That is, if you trust your editor.

4. *You must put the story on the market.* Not your desk drawer. In short story terms, Heinlein meant that you needed to send the story to magazines. For indie authors, it means publishing your book. Even if you feel terrible about the story, it's not up to you to be the judge of your work. Readers decide how good the story is.

5. *You must keep the story on the market until sold.* In the magazine world, if you got a rejection, Heinlein meant that you had to send the story to another magazine until someone bought it. In the indie world, it means keep your book for sale everywhere so that readers around the world can buy it. You never know when someone will stumble upon your work. If you pull your book down because you think it's embarrassing, well...you are depriving yourself of future earnings.

These five rules are hard to follow, but if you do, you'll have a long career!

## **Every Book Has Its Time**

Traditional publishers operate under a "produce" model. Just like produce at a grocery store goes stale and has to be replaced with fresher products, the books that publishers create also go stale and lose the publisher's attention unless they're selling very well. The authors of those books soon find

themselves with no royalties to show for signing away their copyrights.

Indie publishing doesn't work that way. When you publish a book, it never goes stale. You can always refresh the book cover and book description if needed, but the story itself will be just as fresh as it was the day you published it...even ten years later when a reader stumbles upon it.

Also, just because you publish a book that doesn't sell very many copies today, that's not a predictor of the book's future. Cultural trends can change at any time, and suddenly, readers might be looking for a book just like yours. You just have to pay attention to the market.

Every book has its time. Things that are unpopular today may not be tomorrow. Don't sweat it if your book doesn't do well, and whatever you do, don't pull it off the market!

## INCOME-GENERATING ACTIVITIES

Let's talk about the most important activities in your writing life: the ones that will make you money! Writing is about creative expression, but I also believe it's about creating a stream of income that can support you and your family, so it pays to be entrepreneurial about your writing.

### **Set Your Strategy**

You probably thought I was going to say writing was the most important income-generating activity. It is, but first, let's talk about strategy. Spending time thinking about where you are and how you want to get to the next level of your career is important. Many writers don't take the proper time to strategize—they just do one thing after another with no real strategy behind it, and so they expend unnecessary energy.

Strategy is about self-awareness. Who are you, why are you a writer, what fulfills you, how will you stay motivated... these are all questions you must know the answers to before

you can develop an effective strategy. If you don't know the answers to these, you will suffer from short-sighted syndrome. You'll make decisions that may not be in your long-term best interest.

What's your North Star? What do you ultimately want from writing?

In my writing business, my strategy is quite simple: write the books that fulfill me while entertaining and educating my readers, without burning myself out so that I can make a sustainable full-time living from my work.

I have five strategic priorities:

1. Become a world-class content creator: how can I make content that my readers will love every time?
2. Become a world-class marketer: how can I market that content like a boss and make a ton of money doing it?
3. Become a technology-driven writer: how can I utilize current and future technologies to become a better version of myself?
4. Become a data-driven writer: how can I utilize data to make informed decisions?
5. Become the writer of the future: how can I stay nimble on the tides of an uncertain future so that I'm always relevant?

Each of those strategic pillars serve as guideposts for the decisions I make.

What's your strategy? It will probably look nothing like mine. It might be as simple as "write romance novels that make readers fall in love with my characters." You may not have the strong entrepreneurial tendencies that I have, and that's okay. Just make sure you have a strategy!

Smart strategy always attracts income because it ensures you're doing the right things at the right time.

### **ABW: Always Be Writing**

Writing is the most important income-generating activity, but it's not the only one.

The math is simple: if you have zero books, you will make zero dollars.

The more books you write, the more you increase your earnings potential. Note that I said "potential." Writing a book alone doesn't guarantee you income. That's why writing isn't the *only* income-generating activity. If it was, the landscape of self-publishing would look radically different than it does today, and anyone could publish a book and mint money.

There's a dark side to focusing too much on writing. If you write, write, write, and ignore marketing and business, it's to your detriment. It's easy to do, though, because marketing and business don't come naturally to writers, and it's human nature not to want to do them. I was guilty of this early in my career.

Keep writing, but make sure that it's not your only strategy.

### **ABEM: Always Be Email Marketing**

In today's digital age, email marketing is a required skill. Everyone has an email address. Building an email list of devoted buyers is lucrative, and it should be an early priority in your career.

What if, every time you had a new book out, you emailed your list, and sat back and watched the money roll in as they

bought the book? That's real. The bigger your list is, the bigger your payday is. A book launch is like going to the bank.

Your time is well-spent creating a compelling lead magnet, monthly newsletter, and autoresponder sequence. The three of these work together in tandem to create income while you sleep. If you don't understand the art of copywriting, learn that too.

There's a saying in marketing: "the money is in the list." But don't be fooled by big lists. It's better to have a smaller, more engaged list than a big list where most of the people don't open your emails. High open and click rates should be your goal, not subscribers.

If you have only written one book, ignore everything I just said. Write a few more and then come back to this chapter.

## **ABA: Always Be Advertising**

Pay-per-click advertising is an essential skill for a writer to learn. I don't know if it will always be effective. I've heard articles talk about a distant future where pay-per-click advertising doesn't exist, and the evidence is quite convincing, so that means you should take advantage of the tactic while it makes money.

Pay-per-click advertising services such as Facebook and Amazon Advertising are complicated to learn, so it pays to invest in a course where a professional teaches you about them. I recommend Mark Dawson's Facebook Ads and Bryan Cohen's Amazon Ads School courses. Otherwise, you can get really confused trying to learn this stuff and burn through a lot of money in the process.

Ads are big money makers when done correctly.

For one of my books, on average, for every dollar I spend, I make two. Not kidding.

You can build your skill level by studying ad copy for books in your genre and by improving your book description.

The hardest part in my opinion is understanding how to interpret the data that pay-per-click advertising gives you. You don't always know what's working and what isn't unless you have someone to show you how to read the data.

If you have only written one book, also ignore everything I just said. Write a few more and then come back to this chapter.

### **ABI: Always Be Interacting**

Take the time to interact with your fans. It's a subtle moneymaker.

Do you know how many authors *don't* respond to their fans? It's a shockingly high number.

My opinion is that anyone who takes the time to write you a heartfelt email about how your book impacted them is someone who deserves a response. So what if you have a thousand emails in your inbox? How is that your reader's problem? How is the fact that you don't have much time your *reader's* problem? Could you imagine if a barber complained about customers coming in and wanting haircuts but his clippers were broken?

It's your job to make yourself available for your customers.

When people email me, they're shocked that I usually respond in a few hours on average. Even if I'm behind on my emails, I always respond in a few days. I do it because I genuinely appreciate every piece of fan-mail I receive and because I like answering people's questions. But I also do it because it's great for sales.

The law of reciprocity states that when you help someone, they're more likely to do something for you. I can't tell you how

many times people say after I respond to their emails, "Which one of your books should I read next?" I never ask them to do this. They always ask *me*. And not only do they buy my books, they share my books with their friends.

That's how *sales* works. It's not scammy or manipulative. It's just being a decent human being and helping people however you can. You'll find that they also want to help you.

All those authors who ignore their fans are leaving tons of money on the table. Readers remember when you don't respond to them. Respect, honor, and help your readers. Go out of your way to do it. You won't be able to measure the impact to your bottom line, but you'll see it grow over time.

## RADICAL IDEAS ABOUT READERS

This chapter is about the lifeblood of our profession: readers. Without them, we'd have nothing. By following the tips in this chapter, you'll put yourself well above other writers because unfortunately, many writers don't think about how the decisions they make affect readers. I'm not trying to insult other writers...You'll see what I mean.

### **Put Your Readers First**

Keep readers in mind when you make decisions. Ask yourself the following questions:

- How might what I'm doing affect readers?
- How will a new reader react to my website homepage for the first time?
- What might be going through a reader's head when they see my book for the first time? When they finish it?

- How can I be more thoughtful about how I put my book together? (nonfiction)
- What's a day in the life of my reader like? HOW do they read? Do they read paperbacks? When? Ebooks? When?

These questions sound simplistic, but they will guide your decision-making in a way that keeps you in tune with your readers.

There's a legend that Jeff Bezos, the CEO of Amazon, leaves an empty chair at the table during board meetings. The empty chair represents the customer. There's no doubt that Amazon is the king of serving its customers.

Also, remember that just because something is best for you doesn't mean it's always best for your reader. Try to find win-wins.

## **Think Like a Reader**

Don't forget that YOU are a reader too.

When we become writers, we don't always remember what it's like to be in readers' shoes. It's an interesting contradiction. The moment we start writing, it's as if we never read a single book in our lives.

How would YOU respond to your plot twist? Would you love it, hate it, or would any part of it force you to stop suspending your disbelief?

How would YOU feel when you discovered a new favorite author? Would you share the book on social media or email the author to tell them how much you appreciate them or do nothing?

With a little effort, we can retrain our minds to connect with our own personal experiences.

## **Respond to Your Fan-mail Freakishly Fast**

What would happen if you implemented a "time service" for your fan-mail? In other words, what if you instituted a rule that you would respond to all of your fan-mail within 48 hours? What would your readers think about that?

That's the goal I set. I'm usually faster than that. I prioritize fan-mail over other emails.

The standard here is so low that you don't have to work very hard to outdo most authors. Many authors don't even have contact forms on their websites, for heaven's sake! Many that do don't even respond to emails! I've never understood that. Why have a contact form if you're not going to respond to people's emails? Anyway, that's a digression.

When you respond to your readers' emails, thank them, be gracious, and be thoughtful about your response. Sometimes readers want me to give a detailed answer to something. Other times, the best response is a heartfelt thank you, and that's it.

As I say on my podcasts and YouTube channel all the time: if someone has paid their hard-earned money for your book and taken the time to draft an email to you, they deserve a response. If you don't respond to your fan-mail, you lose the right to complain about readers not buying your books. It's like people who don't vote but complain about their politicians. It's hard to have patience for those type of people. I know I'm getting a little radical here, but I believe so strongly in respecting your readers that I'm willing to say things that others won't.

Responding to fan-mail becomes harder as you become

more successful, but it's not impossible. One of my secret dreams is to be a bestseller on the level of George R.R. Martin or J.K. Rowling and prove that an author at that level can still respond to fan-mail, just to prove my point and show how ridiculous it is that some authors don't respect their fans. We'll see if I ever get there!

## **Don't Respond to Reviews, Ever**

Readers have a right to leave reviews. They have a right to like or not like a book, and as authors, we must respect those rights. No exceptions.

Reviews are public. Readers have a right not to have their reviews tampered with. This means that authors *should* not harass readers who leave them bad reviews, even if those readers deserve it. Some reviewers are Grade A jerks, and that's just how it is. Don't let the jerks distract you from the good people who often don't get as much attention.

When you respond to reviews, it reflects poorly on your author brand.

Readers like their spaces to be sacred and unpolluted by authors. Reviews on product pages is one of those sacred spaces, as is reading communities. This is why many reading communities have strict rules about authors. Too many writers have tried to spam these spaces with "buy my book" posts.

A popular counterargument to responding to reviews is "I have to respond because I don't want readers to think my book is bad." Readers are smarter than we give them credit for. They can tell if a reviewer is a jerk. They can also read both good and bad reviews and make informed decisions for themselves what to buy. They don't need you to help them. If anything, your very

presence in the review section responding to and attacking other readers will chase them away.

## **Your Brand is Everything**

Be thoughtful about how your author brand appears online. Everyone has a brand whether they like it or not. Far better to control it than to ignore it.

When prospective readers Google you for the first time, do you want readers to see tons of blog posts about you spouting negative opinions of other people, or do you want the focus to be on your books and the positive things you've done?

Whether you like it or not, you're a public figure. Everything you do is public and may be scrutinized. There's a saying in ethics: never do anything you wouldn't want your mother to see on the national news. That's great advice for building a brand.

Tearing other people down tears down your brand. Building others up does the opposite.

You only have two seconds to make a first impression with readers. Don't waste your opportunity.

Here are some easy ways to ensure that your brand is positive:

- Don't review books anymore the moment you become an author. Reviews can be misconstrued and make you enemies. Also, you make statements in what you choose NOT to review too. Reviewing other authors is a lose-lose.
- Don't attack other authors on your blog or social media, even if they deserve it. Let others do it.
- Don't respond to reviews.

- Don't attack your readers, for the love of God...
- Don't engage in scammy or unethical marketing practices.
- Adhere to email marketing best practices and don't abuse readers' email addresses.

Do these things alone and you will avoid giving readers a negative impression when they encounter your brand for the first time.

Remember: it takes years to build a brand, but it takes seconds to destroy it.

## PLANNING FOR THE NEW YEAR

I wanted to spend some time talking about strategy and planning, particularly at the end of the year. An entire year feels like much more than that. The things you did in January seem like an eternity away when you reach December, but they're still important.

December is the perfect time to reflect on how your year went: your successes, your failures, your goals, and your dreams. Keep this chapter handy at the end of the year and follow the tips to set yourself up for an amazing new year.

### **What Were Your Major Accomplishments for the Year?**

How many books did you write? Short stories? Blog posts? Other types of special content? Tally them up!

How much money did you make? How many books did you sell? Did you make more or less than you expected? Why?

How many people joined your community this year? How

many people did your email list, blog, or social media platforms bring into your gravitational field?

How much fan-mail did you receive?

What investments did you make in your business that made you smarter, faster, or stronger?

What were your biggest failures this year? Which books took you the longest to write? What other missteps did you make that you regret? It is my personal experience that failure is a better teacher than success.

Take the time to celebrate your accomplishments and reflect on your failures.

## **What Were Your Goals for This Year?**

Did you write them down? Did you achieve them? Why or why not?

Did you *exceed* your goals? If so, did you set the original goal properly? It's okay to over or underestimate your goals, but it may be helpful to examine what caused you to project them incorrectly.

## **What Are Your Goals for Next Year?**

I'm sure there are many things you want to accomplish next year, and I recommend that you write them all down. But if you could only achieve one of those goals, what would it be? If you woke up tomorrow and it was December 31 of the coming year, what would you have wanted to have accomplished? What if that goal was a moonshot?

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### **What Are Smaller Goals You Can Set?**

How many days are left until the new year? If you have a week left, what are some smaller goals you can set before the current year runs out so you can finish it strong? Don't neglect the year you're living in for the next one!

Answer the questions in this chapter and you'll have a great game plan for the new year.

## A CLEAR STRATEGY FOR THE NEW YEAR

In this chapter, we're going to help you get clear on your plan for next year. In the last chapter, we mostly reflected on the current year, but now it's time to start looking forward.

### **What's Your Mission Statement?**

A mission statement is a business's reason for being. Here are some famous examples.

American Express: To become the world's most respected service brand.

LinkedIn: To connect the world's professionals to make them more productive and successful.

Kickstarter: To help bring creative projects to life.

The best mission statements are simple and serve as the essence of why the company exists. The mission statement strips away all but the most important reason for existence. It's what the business intends to do.

My hunch is that most writers have a simple mission statement: to entertain and delight readers with world-class stories. It's that simple. Don't overthink it. I've seen some writers develop unusual mission statements, but they forget why we exist.

## **What's Your Vision Statement?**

The mission statement is what the business intends to do; the vision statement is what happens when the business does.

Consider the vision statements for the same companies.

American Express: Provide the world's best customer experience every day.

LinkedIn: Create economic opportunity for every member of the global workforce.

Kickstarter (paraphrased): A world where everyday people decide the products and services that are created, not investors or executives.

A great way to think about the mission and vision statement is to put them back-to-back. Let's try it.

American Express: To become the world's most respected service brand, to provide the world's best customer experience every day.

LinkedIn: To connect the world's professionals to make them more productive and successful, and to create economic opportunity for every member of the global workforce.

Kickstarter: To help bring creative projects to life, and to create a world where everyday people decide the products and services that are created, not investors or executives.

Pretty cool, huh?

Here's how a writer might do this.

Urban fantasy: To write the best shapeshifter books, and to make shifters cool again.

Cozy mystery: To write the best mysteries that take place on the California coast, and to have the best plot twists in the industry.

Military science fiction: To write intricate but scientifically accurate military science fiction, and to create races of aliens unseen before.

A writer who writes across multiple genres: No matter what I'm writing, to make readers fall out of their chairs laughing, and to change the narrative about writing only in one genre.

That's how vision statements work. They invite your customers to dream. If their dream aligns with yours, they'll be lifelong readers.

## **Let's Talk About Taxes**

I know, I know...taxes aren't sexy, but they're essential. The new year is a great time to think about your tax strategy while also gathering all your tax documents from the previous year. It's better to handle it in January than wait until the last minute, trust me.

A few questions to ask:

- What were my total expenses for last year?
- What was my total income for the last year?
- If I were audited tomorrow, how would I respond?  
How would I minimize the stress?
- Where do I keep my records, and am I missing anything?

- Is there anything I can do to make my accountant's life easier at tax time?

It's not the most glamorous topic in the world, but a good tax strategy can save you money. The last thing anyone wants to do is owe money on their taxes, so figure out ways you can avoid having to owe (or owe too much).

## **What Are Your Workflows and Processes?**

How efficient are you as an author? In other words, are you certain that the ways you're producing your novels are as lean as they can be?

Efficiency sounds like a strange word to put in the same sentence as an author, but think about it like this: the more efficient you are, the more books you'll write, and the more you'll grow your earnings. If your days are spent dealing with time-consuming website fixes or highly manual processes, that's actually costing you money in the form of future earnings.

I find that many people can discover ways to create better novels faster. Some people take this too far and misunderstand my advice. I'm not an advocate for crappy quality. It's not about being sloppy or creating bad products; it's about creating the best product you can in less time. I believe that being an efficient author is a journey that is always a work-in-progress, but you can optimize your workflows for the moment.

For example, when I used to outline my novels, I discovered that I deviated from my outline in almost every writing session. I spent many hours creating an outline, only not to follow it because I followed my character instead. I had to ask myself: if I am ignoring my outline, why am I doing it? For me, outlining

was just a mental crutch to help me feel good about the story. When I stopped doing it, my stories got better overnight and I cut my novel production time substantially. I'm not telling you to stop outlining—I'm just sharing this as it's one of the clearest examples of author efficiency I can think of.

A business example would be investing a tool like Book Funnel or Story Origin to deliver your lead magnet ebook to readers after they sign up for your mailing list. In the past, I used to fulfill these requests myself. I recorded a video on how to side load ebooks, and I provided tech support to readers who had trouble. That was not a good use of my time. For a small annual fee, Book Funnel now handles this for me, and that saves me time so that I can focus on more important, income-generating activities like writing.

You can improve your efficiency in all areas of your writing life. You just have to be willing to look for inefficiencies. The new year is a great time to think about how you can make your author business more efficient.

## HOW TO MAKE MONEY SELF-PUBLISHING

Let's talk about how to make money self-publishing. Self-publishing and money are not oxymorons. Don't believe the myth that you should never write for money. That kills so many people's careers. Money is important and therefore something that you need in order to have a successful career. The tips in this chapter are the most basic money-making tips for self-published writers.

### **Develop a Money Mindset**

Be good to your money and your money will be good to you. It's that simple.

Here's a tale of two authors.

Author A doesn't write for the money. He wakes up one day surprised to find out that one of his books is selling very well, and suddenly, he has more money than he ever planned to make in his entire career self-publishing. He blows the money because

he doesn't think it will last. It doesn't. He continues working in a job he hates.

Author B is business-minded. She writes a book that does very well and she reinvests her earnings into her platform, building a better website, writing more books in her series, and paying for effective marketing such as Amazon and Facebook ads. She makes enough money to quit her job.

Author A carried the mindset that he would never make any money from his writing. Therefore, when he did make money, he didn't respect it. Therefore, he has nothing to show for it. Author B treated her money with respect and it multiplied. That's how you have to think.

Money coaching is beyond the scope of this book, but many people have an unhealthy relationship with money that blocks them from being more successful in life. What's your relationship with money like, and what would you do if a million dollars were deposited in your bank account tomorrow morning?

## **Write Series**

There's no doubt that series almost always sell better. There's nothing wrong with standalone novels, but it's easier to get readers to buy multiple books in a series than it is to get them to buy multiple standalones, unless you're a literary fiction author.

I have two standalone novels. They sell a handful of copies in a good month. Almost all of my series perform better. My bestselling fiction books are all series. Same with my nonfiction. I have three series in my nonfiction: *Author Level Up Guides*, which are focused on helping writers do something specific in the writing life, such as writing better and faster. I also have my *Indie Author Confidential* series, which is a journal of my

writing life, and I also have the *Writing Tips* series, which offers clear and concise writing tips. The more books I have in each of these series, the better *all* of the books sell.

Series sell better, so write in series if you can. That's one of the primary ways to make money as a self-published author.

## **Harness the Power of Short Stories**

This tip isn't for everyone, but it can be lucrative. You can submit your short fiction to literary magazines that will pay you for them. Some magazines pay as much as one cent per word. That's \$100 for a 10,000-word short story. Some magazines pay even better than that.

Use a site like Ralan.com to determine what the paying markets are and what their submission guidelines are.

Two great books on the topic are *Playing the Short Game* by Douglas Smith and *Taking the Short Tack* by Mark Leslie and Matty Dalrymple. Both books teach you how to make money with your short fiction.

If you write enough stories quickly, you can make a nice income from your short fiction alone. It's a lot of work, but it's a labor of love. Also, short fiction is a great way to market your work. Readers who find you in magazines and like your work will click through to your books, and they can become lifelong fans.

## **Diversify Your Book Formats**

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I've talked about this tip elsewhere in the book, but it's worth reiterating that you'll make more money in the long term if your book is available in multiple formats. At a minimum, your book needs to be in ebook and paperback. If you can afford a *good* professional narrator, then audio is worth it as well. Hardcover and large print are also good suggestions, but they require ISBNs, which cost money if you don't live in a country that offers them for free.

### **Diversify Sales Channels**

I've also touched on this tip elsewhere in the book. The more places you sell your book at, the more likely it is you'll reach readers who would have never found you otherwise. Amazon's Kindle Unlimited is a very small slice of the book market. Many readers don't buy books from Amazon. Consider "going wide" and selling your book at as many retailers as you can in order to maximize your book's reach. Also consider selling books on your website.

I'm positive that new sales channels will continue to pop up in the future; where it makes sense, you'll want to sell your book on these channels too. Collect those revenue streams!

## ADVANCED MONEY-MAKING TACTICS FOR SELF-PUBLISHING WRITERS

Now it's time to talk about some more advanced money-making strategies for writers. Once you have published a few books and attracted a few readers to your platform, you'll be able to take advantage of the tips in this chapter.

### **Your Mailing List**

"The money is in the list." Your mailing list is one of the best ways to make money as an author. Every time you have a new book release, you can email your fans and a certain percentage of them will buy it. The bigger your list is, the better the math becomes.

Investing in the right email service provider is key. There are many of them on the market, and each is great in its own right. What matters is finding the one that works best for you.

I use Getresponse for my email service provider, and I love them. Their user interface is friendly and their customer service

is friendly and responsive. You can check them out at [www.authorlevelup.com/getresponse](http://www.authorlevelup.com/getresponse) (paid link).

The first step to solid email marketing is to develop a good lead magnet. For fiction, it's probably a novella in the world of your best performing series, or a short story. The key is that the story should be similar to what you sell—for example, if you write space opera, your lead magnet should be a space opera story, preferably in one of your already-established universes. If not, readers will be less likely to subscribe to your newsletter. Since I write across genre, I offer a "starter library" of my science fiction and fantasy so readers can get a sense which of my content they'll like the best. You can download my starter libraries for my fiction at [www.michaellaronn.com/fanclub](http://www.michaellaronn.com/fanclub).

For nonfiction, the best lead magnet is something simple that helps subscribers accomplish a single task. My lead magnet is *The Writing Craft Playbook: 20 Fiction and Nonfiction Strategies to Keep Your Readers in the Zone*. It's a short book that helps writers utilize tactics used by the mega bestsellers like Nora Roberts and John Grisham to keep their readers engaged. You can download it at [www.authorlevelup.com/fanclub](http://www.authorlevelup.com/fanclub).

If you don't have a lead magnet, create one.

The second step in solid email marketing is to integrate your mailing list onto your website. Make sure that readers can sign up on your home page, on the side bar of your blog, and even at the footer of your blog posts. The key is to expose readers to the sign-up repeatedly. Include a picture of your lead magnet next to the sign-up so readers know what they'll get for signing up.

## **Set Up Autoresponders**

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The third step in your email strategy is a good autoresponder sequence. The first autoresponder should fire immediately when the reader signs up, and it should deliver your lead magnet. After that, it's up to you how you want to proceed.

For both my fiction and nonfiction, I have around a six-week sequence that gets readers up to speed with who I am and what I've written. The autoresponders subtly sell my books. For every person who signs up, I know a certain percentage of them will buy books from my autoresponders. That's why they're essential—they're like little salespeople who sell your books while you sleep. You don't have to do anything other than set them up. I've seen some entrepreneurs in the marketing space make a living from autoresponders alone. They make money from autoresponders they set up *years* ago. The tactic is that powerful.

## **Affiliate Links**

Affiliate marketing is a revenue-sharing arrangement where individuals (“affiliates”) are paid commissions for selling and promoting the products and services of other businesses.

The most popular and internationally-recognized affiliate program in the world is Amazon Associates. Nearly anyone can sign up to be an Amazon Associate, and they can include Amazon affiliate links on their website—if someone clicks on an affiliate link and buys anything on Amazon, the associate receives a small commission because the theory is that they helped create a sale where one wouldn't have existed otherwise.

While Amazon is the most easily understood example of affiliate marketing, many entrepreneurs pay affiliate commissions for their products, services, and online courses, usually

offering affiliates free copies in exchange for a review. The affiliate then makes commissions on any future sales they refer.

Affiliate marketing can sometimes involve ethical and legal perils. Some countries like the United States legally require affiliates to disclose any affiliate links and/or whether they received a product for free to avoid misleading customers.

While affiliate income may not be as lucrative for books, authors can still make affiliate income by promoting books, products, and services that they use or enjoy to their audiences. This is an advanced tactic because you can get creative with it—maybe there are products and services that you use that your audience would be interested in! Why not make a little money in referrals if you can?

## **Repurposing Content**

This is a master tactic, particularly if you have a blog or podcast.

For example, I have a podcast called “Writing Tip of the Day,” where I deliver a crisp writing tip in less than five minutes per day. *This very book you’re reading* is a repurposing of the content on the show. I turned my popular podcast into a book, and now it’s a new revenue stream that makes money alongside the show, with a new entry in the series every year. That’s how you repurpose content.

You can repurpose blog posts into infographics, quotes for social media, and more. Your only limit is your imagination. Fiction writers are somewhat limited here, but nonfiction writers can do almost anything if they’re creative enough.

## **Subsidiary Rights**

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An important way to make more money as a writer is to exploit your copyrights. A single book can become an almost limitless number of formats: ebook, trade paperback, hardcover, audiobook, and so on. You can sign deals to translate your book or make a movie or television show out of it too. Even making merchandise such as cups and t-shirts is a smart way to exploit your copyrights. The opportunities don't come around that often if you're a new writer, but they will at some point, especially if your books are doing very well. Savvy writers understand the power of their copyrights and how to exploit them. This is why an understanding of copyright is important.

If you need a copyright refresher, check out my series on the topic on YouTube: [www.authorlevelup.com/copyrightvideos](http://www.authorlevelup.com/copyrightvideos).

## TAX TIPS FOR WRITERS

Welcome to the last and least exciting chapter of the book!

Taxes are important. Get them right and you can actually save money. Get them wrong and you'll create massive headaches for yourself. Nothing in this chapter should be taken as accounting advice, but here are some basic tips that will hopefully make your life easier at tax time. Also, these tips apply most to writers in the United States, but I've tried to keep them as generic as possible, as they're still smart best practices no matter what country you live in.

### **Get an Accountant**

Please. Retire your DIY tax software the moment you decide to become a writer. I've heard scary stories from my accountant friends about people who used apps like TurboTax for business, didn't know what they were doing, and ended up owing tens of thousands of dollars to the government. Don't chance it.

Doing your personal taxes by yourself is fine if you're not a

writer—most people's tax situations aren't that complicated. But the moment you register a business entity and start making purchases in the name of the business, it becomes way more complicated. Hire a professional accountant who has experience with writers and freelancers so they can help you get your affairs in order. The last thing you want to do is owe money because you made a mistake in your accounting, or because you hired an accountant who isn't familiar with writing businesses.

A good accountant is especially important once you start making a profit from your writing, as chances are much higher now that you'll owe money. It'll cost you, but it's a cost of doing business.

## **Keep Good Records**

Don't be the person who walks into their accountant's office at tax time, a week before the tax deadline with a shoebox full of unorganized receipts. That's an easy way to ensure that your taxes for the year won't go well.

Even worse, don't be the author who doesn't keep records of their expenses at all. The very thought of that makes me shudder.

Every time you make a purchase in your writing business, keep the receipt. Since most of the purchases you will make will likely be digital, you'll receive an email receipt. Save that receipt in a folder on your email client or to a folder on your desktop. Organize that folder with subfolders and name the files based on the date and what you bought.

For example, in my expenses folder, I group my expenses into multiple categories:

- Design Expenses
- Editing Expenses
- Marketing Expenses
- Book Expenses
- Recurring Annual Business Expenses
- Recurring Monthly Business Expenses
- Other Business Expenses
- Continuing Education Expenses
- Travel Expenses
- Virtual Assistant Expenses

Inside each of these folders, I name the purchase as follows: MMDDYYYY Expense Name.

This classification method allows me to keep very good and detailed records. If I ever have a question about a cover design expense, there's a folder for that. Same with business expenses. Everything is clean and organized. At tax time, I simply zip the folder and send it to my accountant.

It's also a good idea to keep copies of all your sales reports and tax documents that are sent to you at tax time. Your accountant will need those too.

## **Be Careful with Travel Expenses**

In the United States, an easy way to get audited by the government is accrue travel expenses that don't make any sense. I'm always cautious with my travel expenses for this reason.

If you travel to a writing conference, many of the expenses for that trip are tax-deductible, such as the airplane ticket, hotel room, any transportation such as Uber or taxis, and any fees you pay to attend the conference. Where you can get into trouble,

though, is meals, especially if you start paying for other people. Talk to your accountant about what you can and can't claim, and be judicious with what you submit.

## **Make "Business" Purchases**

Anything you purchase in the name of your business can be justified as a tax-deductible expense. A new computer, books, hardware such as keyboards and mice—all of these can be tax-deductible, as long as you can prove that you're using them in your business.

Some additional tax-deductible expenses:

- Amazon and Facebook ad fees
- Email marketing service provider costs
- Subscription services such as Kindle Unlimited
- Any books you buy to research a work-in-progress
- Author proofs and advanced review copies in print
- Giveaway prizes
- Writing apps

The more you can claim, the better. Your accountant can help you determine a full list of things to claim.

## **Be Conscious of What You're Doing**

At the end of the day, if you are audited, you need to prove to the government that you're running a legitimate business and trying to make a profit. My understanding is that the standards

are pretty low—the government just wants to make sure you're not committing fraud or tax evasion, and we can all agree it's a good idea *not* to do that.

Even if you're not making much money, it's still best practice to conduct yourself like a business. If you don't have the right money mindset as I mentioned in a previous chapter, it'll hurt you at tax time too.

## NEXT STEPS

If you enjoyed this book, you'll *love* my podcast "Writing Tip of the Day." Every Monday through Friday, I deliver a crisp writing tip in 5 minutes or less. It's the perfect way to start your day, and even better for binging when you're driving to work or doing chores. Get quality writing tips quickly that you can put into action immediately.

"Writing Tip of the Day" is available wherever you get your podcasts, including your Amazon Alexa devices. Subscribe at [www.authorlevelup.com/writingtipoftheday](http://www.authorlevelup.com/writingtipoftheday).



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[www.authorlevelup.com/books](http://www.authorlevelup.com/books)

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## MEET M.L. RONN



Science fiction and fantasy on the wild side!

M.L. Ronn (Michael La Ronn) is the author of many science fiction and fantasy novels including the Modern Necromancy, The Last Dragon Lord, and Sword Bear Chronicle series.

In 2012, a life-threatening illness made him realize that storytelling was his #1 passion. He's devoted his life to writing ever since, making up whatever story makes him fall out of his chair laughing the hardest. Every day.

*Learn more about Michael*

[www.authorlevelup.com](http://www.authorlevelup.com) (for writers)

[www.michaellaronn.com](http://www.michaellaronn.com) (fiction)

[michael@michaellaronn.com](mailto:michael@michaellaronn.com)



