

DISCOVERING THE DIAMOND

by

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SECTION 1

TIPS OF THE TRADE FOR NEW NOVELISTS

Introduction

As a published author of historical novels, I am often asked for advice by people who are new to writing or who have been writing for years, but not yet succeeded in getting their work published. I found that I was giving the same advice so often that it seemed sensible to put it all together into a set of ‘guidelines’. These are intended for novice writers of ‘popular fiction’ and do not discuss non-fiction, for while the principles of ‘good writing’ may apply equally to both, how they are produced is different.

Writing a novel is not just about writing.

Writing is the easy bit. Most of the work is in the planning (the thinking), in the structure (the plot), and in turning the first draft into a readable, enjoyable, top quality, novel. All of which involves reading, and re-reading and *re*-reading! Your idea, your characters, the pace, the style, all of that may be fantastic, but without a thorough edit, without checking for technique, consistency, continuity, grammar, spelling and punctuation, your novel will not shine. Of course it is nice to have a book in print and know people have read it, but is that enough? As an established author, I want my work to be read not just once, but again and again. I want readers to think of my characters as old friends and dip into the story every now and then to refresh the friendship – and with each reading to experience the same excitement and enjoyment as they did the first time. You *can* achieve this, but only if your novel is well written. If great chunks of it are a little tedious, or there are too many errors of continuity or “believability” your readers will give up on you and not come back for a second bite – or indeed, will lose interest and never finish it in the first place. Fat chance for your next book then!

What do you hope to achieve?

How you go about publishing your novel is largely a question of what you hope to achieve and how much, both in terms of time and money, you are prepared to invest in it. Are you looking simply to see your words in print – or are you hoping to gain some financial return for your investment? Unless you are *incredibly* talented and *incredibly* lucky (or both!) there is a high probability that your novel will not be accepted by a mainstream publisher. There are, of course, solid financial reasons for this. Publishers are in the business to make money; you may have written a masterpiece, but unless there is a market for it, bearing in mind they are looking to sell tens of thousands of copies, not mere hundreds, they will pass it up.

Sadly, few of us write masterpieces, but that is not why so many first novels fail to make it into the high street. In the main it is because they lack polish and are very obviously written by novice writers. “That’s all very well,” you may say, “but everyone has to start somewhere.” Certainly that’s true, but these days – more’s the pity – mainstream publishers do not have the time, money or inclination to nurture a novice, even one who shows a degree of talent. They want books that already shine splendidly, that are bright enough to be instant bestsellers – and rarely are they prepared to do the polishing. Sadly the old days of publishing the basic “darn good read” has withered away.

Nowadays, the majority of publishers refuse to accept work that is not submitted via a literary agent. Agents receive *hundreds* of submissions weekly. If your book happens to be one of the lucky ones it might get looked at. Many are not. Some don’t even make it out of the envelope (there can surely be no other reason why so many SAEs fail to find their way home!). But let’s be positive and suppose yours is one of the lucky ones. Your opening paragraph *must* grab the agent by the throat, hang on like a terrier and not let go. Few agents will read beyond the first page unless something sparks their interest; even fewer beyond the first chapter. Present a manuscript full of errors and typical novice ‘mistakes’ and neither agent nor publisher will read any further. On the other hand, polish your work, make it a cracking good read and show you have potential; then maybe – just maybe – you will be in with a chance. At the very least, you will have done the best you can for your novel.

Imagine you have been invited to a job interview or an important social event where your future rests on making a good impression. Do you turn up looking scruffy with the attitude that if these people can’t be bothered to look beneath your appearance to find the *real* you, then it’s their loss? Or do you dress to look smart, stay on your best behaviour and try to scintillate? Most of us would go for the latter – so why send your novel to an agent or publisher in a half-finished, dull, unpolished state?

SECTION 2

THINKING OF GOING SELF PUBLISHED?

Where to get published

For how to get published with a *mainstream* publishing house I would recommend Carole Blake's *From Pitch to Publication* where you will find everything you need.

Most Publishing Houses do not accept unsolicited manuscripts (i.e. they will not accept anything without a previous letter of enquiry). Nor do many Houses accept anything that does not come from an agent.

You are more likely to be accepted by an agent if your manuscript is well-written, however, and expect several weeks – if not months - before receiving a reply. Sadly, neither agents nor publishers are quick off the mark with submitted work.

Going Self or Assisted Publish?

Many writers – and not just novices - frustrated by the endless arrival of enough reject slips to paper the downstairs cloakroom, are turning to self- or assisted publishing. What is the difference between the two? Isn't it just the same as the dreaded 'vanity publishing'? In a word: 'No!'

Vanity publishers take your manuscript as it stands; their only input is to turn it into print, glitches and all, crop the pages to make it look somewhat like a book and slap a cover on it – for which they will charge you through the nose, no matter how well – or otherwise – you have written it. Your book is not produced to sell in bookstores, but for you, your friends and family to admire and enjoy. And there's absolutely *nothing* wrong in that - if that is all you want.

To *self*-publish implies a greater degree of author-involvement. Indeed, and as the term suggests, it is to do *everything* for yourself bar the actual printing. From obtaining an ISBN, to finding a printer to print your novel; an artist to design the layout and create the cover; a copy-editor to help make the best of your writing; a place to store box-loads of books and, finally, the determination to do your own marketing and selling. Some authors do this very successfully, but it takes time and dedication and can end with a garage full of mouldering books because you have run out of the motivation to get out there and sell them. The mice using your paper as a cosy nest are often the only beneficiaries.

With *assisted* publishing, much of the work will be done for you. Neither vanity nor self-publishing offer any quality control; the standard of writing is down to your own judgement, but this is not always the case with assisted publishing houses. Some companies do at least offer a copy-editing service, provide graphic design and a few (Discovered Authors for instance) on a basic standard of writing before they will accept a novel. The better the quality of your writing however, the more likely your book will be marketed and therefore sold.

Print On Demand

The new technology of Print On Demand (P.O.D.) solves the storage problem. Literally, this is printing as required, there is no need for warehousing – any errors, typos, etc., will only be in a few books not in a print run of several thousand and the text can be updated in an instant (especially useful for scientific or topical books such as travel and trade).

Do not confuse P.O.D. with the idea of “instant books” - machines available in coffee bars for instance, where you put your money in, press a button and a bound book comes out. P.O.D. used by a bona fide publisher are quality books with quality paper, print and covers, and professionally typeset with standard, mainstream margins. Some of the lesser quality self-published books have narrow margins, thus saving a few pages of text and therefore the cost of printing. It looks cheap and unprofessional. Try to avoid it.

With the need to save resources because of global warming, and financial limitations, even the big conglomerate publishers are waking up to the usefulness of P.O.D. The only drawback is when it comes to returns. If a book does not sell a bookshop will want to return it to the publisher (where it is usually ‘remaindered’ - destroyed. However, *your* book is going to sell isn’t it!

Fulfilling orders for books via P.O.D. can also possibly be a little slow – turn-around speed will probably depend on the company and/or the distributor.

A Word of Warning.

I am assuming you are reading this because you are interested in going “self-publish” in one of it’s forms or another. Be Careful. There are cowboys out there. There are companies who praise your work, ask for a hefty chunk of money and leave you with a pile of un-readable, poorly printed, unmarketable twaddle and your dreams and aspirations in a shredded heap at your feet. Before you part with your money, ask questions;

- Ask to see a few examples of the books they have already published.
- Contact a couple of the authors on their list. If the company is reluctant to let you do this, wave goodbye and look elsewhere.
- Are any of their books in independent bookshops?
On the whole, Waterstones will only accept self- or assisted publish if there is an ISBN and the books are distributed via one of the national wholesalers – Gardners or Bertrams in the UK, for instance.
- What do they offer in the way of editing and marketing?
- Do not be lured by the adverts and the website alone – do your homework!

Internet Publishing.

Another way of publishing your book is via the internet – but here again, unless you present professional, readable, polished writing, who is going to bother to read it? And the financial reward is limited to non-existent, although to “publish” your book on the internet is often free. It must be said, however that rightly or wrongly bookstores, reviewers and the literary world in general look down on self-publish in all its forms, but in particular on the free internet sites, as they are regarded as vanity publishing at its most basic.

If all you want is to share your story with others then go ahead – but keep in mind that the better written it is, the more likely people will read, and enjoy, it. And therefore will want to come back for more.

Sales and Marketing

You will also be tempted by the promise that your book will automatically be added to Amazon's substantial list (either .co.uk or .com).

Ah. It is not as simple as that.

For Amazon to keep your book listed it has to sell. It has to be supplied to Amazon and the supply must be maintained. Also think about this; it is great to see your book listed there – but for it to *sell* people need to *know about it*. If you have had no reviews or marketing, outside the sphere of your family and friends no one else will be aware your labour of love exists. The glossy advertising of many self/assisted publishing companies does not mention this fact.

Nor are you informed that it is very rare for a self- or assisted-published book to be reviewed further afield than your local paper and your local radio station – and only then, if you are lucky. Mind you, mainstream published books often fare no differently!

Wherever you are published, be prepared to do much of the marketing yourself. Word of mouth recommendation is the best way to sell books. *Harry Potter* became popular when U.S.A. readers started talking enthusiastically about it.

Despite what the adverts say very few self-published novels go on to be accepted into mainstream publishing houses, but it can and does happen occasionally - perhaps not with your first novel, but maybe with your second, particularly if your first sells demonstrably well and creates a demand from your readers.

Be realistic about the number of books you are probably going to sell. Aim for a few hundred not a few thousand. At least at first.

Websites and Blogs

It is probably a good idea to have a website and a public e-mail address. If you cannot pay for professional help, sites like MySpace and Facebook are free and are good for marketing and networking. My sites are at the end of these notes – take a look, browse around and see what I have included to publicise my own books.

Blogs are also useful, but whatever you use you must be prepared to maintain and update them constantly. You want people to be interested in you and your book - and to keep coming back. If nothing changes, they will stop coming.

The stages of self-publishing a book

I am referring here mostly to “assisted” publishing via a package with a publishing company (Discovered Authors UK or Author House for instance).

To be in total control, i.e. self-publishing, printing, marketing and selling your book yourself, involves a lot more effort and is along the lines of running your own business.

If you publish with a mainstream publishing house, your publisher will take care of most of the publishing process for you: arrange editors, design, cover etc., and of course, be responsible for marketing and sales. Even so, as I have said, I would advise you to undertake your own marketing in addition to whatever your publisher proposes.

Whatever publishing process you use, much of the basic process of *producing* a book is the same:

- You write it. (The hardest part of writing is actually putting your bottom on a chair and getting on with it!)
- You re-write it.
- You re-write it again
- You ensure it is at the best standard you can achieve – it might be an idea to have it professionally copy-edited at this stage. If submitting to a mainstream publisher this may not be necessary as they should undertake to edit it. On the other hand, the better the quality of your book, the more likely it is to be read and accepted by a publisher. .
- Once satisfied, you choose a mainstream publisher (or agent) and submit your manuscript – and wait for a reply (often months rather than weeks). Alternatively, you select an assisted publishing company. Not all will blindly accept your book if it is not up to a good enough standard, so once again, you do need to ensure that it is well written and presented.

One way or another, once your novel is accepted, you go through the administration of signing contracts etc., and are ready to start the actual publishing process.

- Your book *may* need a full edit.
- Your book *will* need a copy edit
- Re-read and correct your work at every stage. This is *your* responsibility *not* the publisher’s.
- Ask for page proofs (i.e. typeset as it will appear when finally bound.) If assisted or self-publish this may be sent to you as a computer file, in which case you will have to print it out. I strongly advise reading your work as “hard copy” at this stage. You may not pick up minor errors on a VDU screen - a ‘.’ instead of a ‘,’ for instance; or ‘ ‘ two spaces where only ‘ ‘ one should be.
- Your cover will be designed.
- An ISBN number will be given.
- A publication date will be assigned.

Selling your book

Monthly magazines usually require a minimum of six weeks' notice – usually more. Very few books get reviews in magazines or the national newspapers, 'self' publish even less so. But arguably, reviews do not necessarily sell books anyway! Word of mouth is the best "review". All authors like to see their books on shelves in bookstores, but there are thousands of novels published each month and shops stock only those books that they know will sell, so do not be disappointed if your book does not appear in every branch of Waterstones or Barnes & Noble. Amazon is often *the* place from which to sell.

Mainstream books usually have a limit of a two-week marketing period (which may be high profile if you are *very* lucky) The expectation is for the novel to sell quickly within the first month or two, then slow down to a steady number and depending on what genre of book it is, perhaps tail off to a mere trickle. Many "Celeb" books, especially biographies, are expected to sell within only a three or four month period. After that, what is left is remaindered. Too bad if the publisher misjudged the popularity of the "Star" or the politician.

For most authors the dream of hitting the Best Seller list usually remains that – a dream; but it is a nice ambition to trail after.

The best way to sell books – especially assisted/self published novels, is the "long tail" method. Slow, steady sales, month after month after month. Maybe only one or two books each month, but that will build to several a year.

Let's get one thing straight here. If you are writing a book to make your fortune – or even to make a living – on the whole *forget it*. Do not give up the day job. The J.K. Rowlings of the literary world are *very* few and far between. At risk of being overly repetitive – but it cannot be said too often - the better your book is written, copy-edited and presented, the more likely it is to sell.

If it is poorly produced, is overflowing with errors of print and continuity and is, let's be frank, boring, or cluttered with purple prose, it will not sell.

One final thing for you to think about honestly:

I am often asked to read one or two chapters of a new author's labour of love and to give an opinion as to their potential publishability. I always try to find something constructive and positive to say, whatever the standard. There is nothing so soul-destroying as receiving your work back with lines and lines crossed out and nothing encouraging said about it. I know, I've been there!

Sometimes being enthusiastic is easy; there are a few authors I have responded to by asking for the rest of the manuscript because I want to read more. Most of the chapters I am sent are "ok" that is to say, there is a good plot a good balance between narrative and dialogue and good characterisation; I can see that the book has potential, but almost always I also see too many of the usual "novice" mistakes that detract from the quality of the writing. Indeed, one reason why my copy-editor Jo Field and I wrote these notes was because we found that we were so often giving the same advice to "wannabe" authors.

However, it must be said that a few of the manuscripts I receive to critique are, if I'm truthful, simply not good enough. Even then, I always find something positive to say. Often, a potentially good author needs only encouragement to improve their technique. What I do find frustrating is to give my time and advice only for it to be completely ignored. To illustrate this I include the following, made up, example:

Dear A.N. Author,

Thank you for sending the first two chapters of your novel. I enjoyed reading them, you have some interesting ideas and an intriguing plot.

Can I suggest, however, that you tend to "head hop" between characters rather a lot, which makes it a little confusing to follow in places, and some of your historical detail is a little inaccurate, which, combined with your frequent use of author's voice, detracts from the flow and quality of the story. For example, 'adrenalin' is not a word that should be used in historical novels – I suggest using "blood heat" or "blood lust" and Elizabeth Tudor was not called Elizabeth I until there was an Elizabeth II, I would therefore suggest you refer to her simply as Queen Elizabeth – or if you want to be less formal, 'Gloriana' or 'Good Queen Bess', as she was known by many of her contemporaries. I also notice that you have one or two errors of continuity (were you aware that your main character's eyes change colour in Chapter Two?) and would advise that before you submit your manuscript you consider having it professionally copy-edited.

In the meantime, I have attached 'Discovering the Diamond' and highlighted a few of the areas on which you may wish to concentrate as you re-draft your novel.

Good Luck!

Helen

Dear Mrs Hollick

Thank you for reading my first two chapters. I firmly believe, however, that a writer's style and use of words is his or her own unique voice. I have already submitted my manuscript to several publishing houses and have received many encouraging replies.

That my book is not their style, however, shows a lack of foresight on their part.

Thank you for the suggestions, but I am perfectly capable of editing my own work, although I may get my aunt to read it. I don't see the need for a copy-editor.

Yours.

A.N. Author.

I find it very sad that so many hopeful authors refuse to look at their work with honesty. No author can self assess - nor can family members and friends be relied upon to give an un-biased opinion. More than anything else, their chief concern is not to hurt your feelings. You have to face the possibility that you may never be able to write well enough to be accepted by mainstream and that your only choice is to sell your books to your circle of family and friends.

Be honest with yourself. If your novel is constantly rejected by agents and/or publishers, maybe, just maybe, this is because, to put it bluntly, your novel is simply not good enough to be published. However, if you are a 'real author' – that is, someone who lives to write, rather than someone who simply fancies the thought of seeing his or her name in print, then persevere.

Read other people's books; **ask advice** from other writers – and *take* it! **Continue to improve your technique**, and eventually you *will* succeed.

SECTION 3

THE BASICS OF WRITING A GOOD NOVEL

The suggestions in this section are not set in stone. There will always be exceptions to a so-called 'rule' and as you gain in experience you will know when these exceptions can be made. The following tips represent good practice for inexperienced authors, but your book is YOUR book, written in YOUR voice and style, so think of them only as guidelines.

Beginning the polishing

I often think the first draft of a novel is like a diamond when it is first dug out of the ground. A dull looking lump of rock that needs to be cleansed of dirt before it is possible to see what it is. Then it needs to be cut and shaped before it can be polished - and polished and polished... Only then is the glittering diamond, i.e. the finished book, revealed.

Generally speaking, at the rough-stone stage your work is not yet ready for a professional edit or to be submitted to an agent or publisher; it is up to you to do this initial clean-up. If you find it difficult, read out loud what you have written. Your voice will pick up the oddities: where you find you are running out of breath perhaps there ought to be some punctuation? If you sound a bit stop-start, jerky, maybe there is too much? Reading aloud can also help your dialogue; show you where your characters are saying too much or too little, or their speech sounds artificial and contrived.

By all means ask a friend or relative to edit for you (professional editors do charge a fee) but it is no good asking your mother, partner or best friend unless he or she is prepared to be honest and critical – and unless you are prepared to accept that criticism. If all you want to hear is how good the book is then I suggest you stop reading this here and now. You are not going to become a published writer. Sorry!

Assuming you welcome constructive criticism and are reading this because you want to learn your craft and become a *real* writer, with books in print that are actually going to be bought, read and enjoyed... read on.

Setting the scene

When you write, it is as if you are watching a film in your head. You can see the scene unfolding: you have invented the characters, you know what they look like, their mannerisms, their clothes. You can hear their voices and see their surroundings. It is important to remember that your readers cannot; not unless *you* set the scene rolling. The trick is to ensure they are watching the same film as you! This does *not* mean writing endless chunks of descriptive prose down to the finest detail (heaven forbid!) but just enough to paint a picture – and wherever you can, *show*, rather than tell. For example:

Tell: As he stepped ashore the wind had got up; it made him feel cold...

Show: As he stepped ashore a rattle of dead leaves hurled at his feet. Somewhere a loose shutter was banging. He shivered...

Showing paints a better picture than telling. By the same token, if you want your readers to see the main characters as you see them, be sure to describe them as soon as possible after introducing them. If you leave it too late, your description may be so different from the ones your readers have already imagined, they will be completely thrown – maybe right out of your book. If your story is good enough, while they may be prepared to make the mental adjustment, they may still lose sympathy with your character (i.e. stop caring). It needs only a couple of sentences to give a flavour of your character's appearance:

...He studied the sea again with the telescope. Jesamiah Acorne. Quick to smile, yet formidable when angered. Tall, tanned, with strong arms and a seaman's tar-stained and callused hands. His black hair fell as an untidy chaos of natural curls to his shoulders, laced into it, lengths of blue ribbon that streamed about his face in the wind...

This is just enough to give a vivid image of Jesamiah. Any more at one go would be too much; the rest can come later, building a gradual picture of his appearance, working it smoothly into the narrative: a glimpse of his sailcloth trousers as he leans against the mast, or of his salt-stained, buckram coat as he strides across the quay.

POV and 'Author's Voice'

You need to create believable characters in believable situations doing believable things. Yes, maybe your novel is fantasy set in another world, but the art of a writer is to create the believable from the imaginary – in other words you immerse your reader in the story and do not distract him or her from its pace with long, monotonous paragraphs of descriptive detail; line after line of dialogue; scene hopping, use of author's voice and bewildering "point of view" (POV) changes.

Character A cannot possibly know what is going on inside Character B's head unless B tells him or there are some visible signs, such as a change of expression – or unless A has psychic powers! But too much head-hopping, changing from one character's perspective to another's, can be confusing. The last thing you want is for your readers to keep re-reading a sentence to try to work out who said what, as in the example below.

The party was in full swing. Simon replenished his glass of wine and strolled out of the French doors and onto the terrace leaving the hubbub behind him. He leaned on the balustrade and looked out over the garden. It was warm, the shadows of evening beginning to encroach on borders that seemed suddenly vibrant with colour. Across the lawns, bruised magnolia blossoms lay strewn like drifts of snow. Alicia was sitting among them; a lonely figure, leaning back against the tree. Her dress was bright red and for a heart-stopping moment he saw it as a pool of blood. He wanted to rush over, scoop her into his arms; keep her safe. Had he known she had positioned herself there to wait for him, it might have given him pause; as it was, he almost ran down the steps.

Her heart sinking, she watched him come. It was not that she did not like him – on the contrary, he had been kind to her – and he was good to look at with his crisp, black hair and tanned, rugged features. She was supposed to be encouraging his attentions, gaining his confidence, but she did not feel like it, not this evening. His eagerness suffocated her.

"Alicia, you're all on your own!" What a crass thing to say, he thought, embarrassed.

"Observant of you," she softened her sarcasm with a smile. She wondered if they were being watched and cast a quick glance into the gathering shadows.

God, she was beautiful. He felt as if he had two left feet; like a schoolboy lusting after a school mistress. She was petite, fragile, like a piece of delicate porcelain. It was her vulnerability that moved him.

"Not enjoying the party?"

"No villains to chase tonight?" She shifted her weight to curl her legs beneath her.

"Mind if I join you?"

Masking a yawn, she patted the ground beside her, leaning slightly towards him to give an uninterrupted view of her cleavage.

"Even I get to be off duty sometimes," he smiled, his heart quickening, hoping she did not notice the effect she was having on him...

Now the same piece without the constant “head-hopping” and minus the intrusion of author’s voice (i.e. *Had he known she had positioned herself there to wait for him, it might have given him pause...*)

The party was in full swing. Simon replenished his glass of wine and strolled out of the French doors and onto the terrace leaving the hubbub behind him. He leaned on the balustrade and looked out over the garden. It was warm, the shadows of evening beginning to encroach on borders that seemed suddenly vibrant with colour. Across the lawns, bruised magnolia blossoms lay strewn like drifts of snow. Alicia was sitting among them; a lonely figure, leaning back against the tree. Her dress was bright red and for a heart-stopping moment he saw it as a pool of blood. He wanted to rush over, scoop her into his arms; keep her safe. He almost ran down the steps.

“Alicia, you’re all on your own!” What a crass thing to say, he thought, embarrassed. God, she was beautiful. He felt as if he had two left feet; like a schoolboy lusting after a school mistress. She was petite, fragile, like a piece of delicate porcelain. It was her vulnerability that moved him.

“Not enjoying the party? Mind if I join you?”

Her heart sinking, she watched him come. She had known he would find her eventually; had chosen the spot deliberately. It was not that she did not like him – on the contrary, he had been kind to her – and he was good to look at with his crisp, black hair and tanned, rugged features. She was supposed to be encouraging his attentions, gaining his confidence, but she did not feel like it, not today. His eagerness suffocated her.

“Observant of you.” She softened her sarcasm with a smile as she answered his first remark; wondered if they were being watched and cast a quick glance into the gathering shadows.

“No villains to chase tonight?” she asked, shifting her weight to curl her legs beneath her. Masking a yawn, she patted the ground beside her, leaning slightly towards him to give an uninterrupted view of her cleavage. She could see from his strained expression the effect she was having on him and that he was trying to hide it.

“Even I get to be off duty sometimes,” he smiled.

Third or first person?

The third person is most commonly used by novelists, since it enables the author to be omniscient, describe simultaneous events and give an insight into more than one character's innermost thoughts, but beware: it can give rise to author's voice. If you intrude on your readers in this way, you may lose their attention. At the very least you will force them to remember they are reading a story, as opposed to *living* it.

If you choose to write in the first person, you will rarely have a problem with author's voice or POV, but it does restrict you since your main character, the storyteller, can be in only one place at a time so cannot know at first hand what is happening elsewhere. For some reason, first person is less popular with readers - and therefore with publishers. On the other hand, it is a more intimate style of writing and if done well invites readers to become more involved with the main character. It also enables you to express philosophies and opinions, (your character's, of course!) without it seeming like author's voice.

Author's voice can read more like a narration – you are telling the story not revealing it scene by scene. It is better to *show* what is happening rather than *tell* - write from your characters' eyes not yours. It can make all the difference to the flow and pace of your novel. In the example below, the author is **telling**:

Jennings shook his head, Jesamiah left him no choice. He would have to escort the pirate ashore under arrest. He could not risk the chance that he might slip away, and anyway it was for his own good, he was sure Jesamiah did not want a charge of treason hanging around his neck.

Jesamiah was untroubled. He had a tally of misdemeanours as long as his arm already. One more accusation would not make much difference. "I can only hang once."
"You will not hang. You will be incarcerated and left to rot."

A half smile creased Jesamiah's face as he stepped forward two paces. "I don't think so. You have to arrest me first." With this lot of landlubberly daffodils? Hah, no chance! Two men had neglected to cock their hammers, three had damp powder so the primer would not fire. Curlylocks on the end had already pissed his breeches, and Jesamiah doubted the other two had the courage to fire, probably on account of his crew were suddenly holding blades at their throats. With his pistol he made an elaborate gesture to indicate Jennings was to turn around, see for himself the men with drawn knives and readied pistols who had come silent, on bare feet, from the shadows.

Jesamiah's men had dry powder and their weapons were loaded, primed and cocked. He clicked the hammer full home. Of the two of them Jesamiah was more likely to have the order to shoot obeyed.

Now **shown** through the characters' eyes...

Jennings shook his head. "You leave me no choice Captain. I regret, I must ask you to accompany me ashore. Governor Rogers cannot risk you slipping away and it will be for your own good, I am sure you do not want a charge of treason around your neck."

Jesamiah was untroubled. "Add it to the tally of misdemeanours. One more accusation will not make much difference. I can only hang once." "You will not hang. You will be incarcerated and left to rot."

A half smile creased Jesamiah's face as he stepped forward two paces. "I don't think so. You have to arrest me first - with this lot of landlubberly daffodils? Two of your men have neglected to cock their hammers, three have what looks to be damp powder, so the primer will never fire. Curlylocks on the end has already pissed his breeches, and I doubt the other two have the balls to fire, probably on account of my lads holding blades at their throats." With his pistol he made an elaborate gesture to indicate Jennings was to turn around, see for himself the men with drawn knives and readied pistols who had come silent, on bare feet, from the shadows.

"Whereas my men," Jesamiah smiled indolently, "have dry powder and their weapons are loaded, primed and cocked; as is mine." He clicked the hammer full home. "Of the two of us, Henry, who is more likely to have the order to shoot obeyed?"

Try not to use "it was" too often – it is so very much an "author's voice" phrase!

It was Thursday morning. Alicia groaned, she did not want to get out of bed. Her back ached from dancing too much the night before, and her head thumped.

Reads better as:

Alicia groaned. Thursday morning; she did not want to get out of bed ... etc.

Tense

Commonly, novels are written in the past tense. There is no reason why this should be so; the present tense is more immediate and can suit a fast-paced novel, but it can also be difficult to maintain and irritating to read.

It is Thursday morning. Alicia groans, she does not want to get out of bed. Her back is aching from dancing too much the night before, and her head is thumping.

In whichever tense you choose to write, you must be consistent. As you do your in-depth read-through before sending off your draft to an editor or publisher, check your use of tense. If you use **is** in one sentence, ensure you are not using **was** by the end of it!

The example below is slightly exaggerated – although I have read drafts that are almost as bad:

England, Cornwall, **is** many miles, many weeks and many tears behind. Tiola **was not to** see her home or brothers again. **Or** her mother. Mother **was** already in the next world, **going** to God, except as the mob had jeered while she hanged, **they shouted** that a woman who **would plunge** a knife into the heart of her own husband **is** of the Devil's breeding. From there it was an easy step for someone to shout "witch" and for the blood-fever of superstition to spread. **One of her elder brothers hurried** her to safety, Tiola **was also in danger of being lynched**. Her father's blood **being** spattered on her clothes too. The irony? **I t was not Mother who is** the witch.

If in doubt about the tense, again use the trick of reading aloud – often the way something sounds will tell you if it is right or not. Try reading these two paragraphs aloud.

England, Cornwall, **was** many miles, many weeks and many tears behind. Tiola **would not** see her home or brothers again. **Nor** her mother. Mother **was** already in the next world, **gone** to God, except as the mob **had** jeered while she hanged, they **had** shouted that a woman who **plunged** a knife into the heart of her own husband **was** of the Devil's breeding. From there it **had been** an easy step for someone to shout "witch" and for the blood-fever of superstition to spread. **Had it not been** for one of her elder brothers **hurrying** her to safety, Tiola **would** also have been lynched. Her father's blood **had been** spattered on her clothes too. The irony? **I t was not Mother who was** the witch.

Common bloopers

Expressions that are spoken aloud are often okay, but can be hilarious when written; particularly when it involves disembodied body parts!

- The girl feasted her eyes on his face.
- Her eyes roamed around the room.
- Dropping his head into his hands he slumped his shoulders, defeated.
- The head gardener needed to sow the last of the seeds urgently, so offering to help, she ran as fast as her legs would carry her and offered to spread them for him.

We have some well fed eyes that are hard to control as they keep wandering off, a man very careless with dropping his head - and some naughty goings-on in the garden!

Beware of clichés – oft used by novices, too many clichés dull your diamond's sparkle:

- Green with envy.
- White as a sheet.
- A ripe old age.
- Like putty in his hands.
- Raining cats and dogs.
- She pulled a face.

– as do mixed metaphors:

- It was time to step up to the plate and lay his cards on the table.
- She was burning the midnight oil from both ends.
- He needed to take the bull by the tail and look him in the eye.

Check your continuity

If your character has blue eyes in chapter 1, make sure she still has blue eyes in chapter 36. Keep a book, or cards, with details of each character. Write *everything* down – do a complete CV. That way you have all the background details and you will know that character intimately.

If there is a lengthy time-span or many different places, make a temporary note at the start of each chapter – these can be deleted easily at the final edit. That way, when doing your self-edit it is easy to check that a character remains where you have put him until the end of the chapter and does not suddenly pop up somewhere else, unless you write that he has moved to another location. This is even more important if you have a lot of characters in different places at the same time and need to keep tabs on them all.

Try to avoid ‘scene hopping’: if a character is sitting in a car talking, it is best to move him out of the car before the next scene, rather than suddenly “jumping” him into the lounge with a cup of tea! If the walk from the car is too laborious and likely to slow the pace, then leave a line break so that readers know to make the mental adjustment.

Fancy words over-egg the pudding!

If you would usually say: “*The pram’s wheels were round,*” why write, “*the perambulator’s movement mechanisms were spherical.*” Simple words are easier to read.

Do not use too many adjectives: “*The bright, shiny, glittering diamond sparkled in the dazzle of the hot, skin-burning glow of the golden sun.*” “The diamond sparkled in the dazzle of the sun,” conveys what you mean just as well – and reads so much better.

Different voices

Try to ensure your characters speak with different voices: that is not to say use dialect (see below), but each of us has a certain style of speaking. If you are not sure what I mean, go somewhere where you can eavesdrop on people’s conversations. Some will talk in short, simple sentences; others may use high-falutin’ words, while others may habitually repeat themselves, never finish their sentences or frequently use the same phrase or swear-word. If you can achieve these subtle differences of voice in your novel, your characterisation will be all the richer.

“Come in, come in! Do not stand on ceremony, sit, sit. Eat. Hi there, bring fresh tea for the Commodore, ha, ha!” Rogers was all bonhomie as he ushered the new arrival to join him at table. “May I introduce master van Overstratten and m’wife?” Seating himself again he began to tuck into the black pudding he had temporarily abandoned.

Returning the courteous greetings, Vernon bowed politely but obstinately remained standing. He cleared his throat and began to unwrap the canvas package he held beneath his arm. “I am on my way to take up my new command at Port Royal, Governor, from where I will conduct our strategy in these waters against the Spanish. I bring the mail and news from England.”

From this example you can see straight away that Rogers, the Governor of Nassau, is less formal than Commodore Vernon, who is a bit ‘straight laced’.

Dialect and foreign words and phrases

It is off-putting for readers to have to grapple with swathes of dialect. If you want to give the impression of a particular accent, it is enough to use just a few words. In the following example from *Rogues & Rebels*, Jo has used Dickon to show that Josh is speaking in broad Devon. It is enough to give a flavour; thereafter readers will ‘hear’ Josh’s voice even though his dialect is no longer used in the book.

‘The old man peered at them with short-sighted eyes.

‘Maister Alexander, be it yourzel?’ Under his floppy hat, his wizened face creased into a toothless grin.

‘I t is indeed. How are you Josh? I t’s been a long time.’

Josh Randall lowered the pitchfork. ‘Awiz achin an crakin I be, but like the wive do zay to I, thee can’t have two vorenoons in one day, Josh.’ He stared at Dickon. ‘Ur be a Chichester or I baint Josh Randall.’

Grinning wearily, Dickon gave up trying to follow the old man’s broad Devon speech.

Alexander came to his rescue: ‘I see you’re as keen-eyed as ever old man; yes this is Richard Chichester the younger...

By the same token, you should not expect your readers to be able to speak a foreign language. More often than not, they will skim-read the passage, miss the point or throw the book across the room in irritation!

If, for the sake of your story, you must use a different language, then be sure to translate it, as Jo has done in the following example from *Rogues & Rebels*.

Levelling his musket, Lieutenant Green peered at the approaching riders. 'I can't let you through without a password. I'm sorry Captain Blewitt, but I've got my orders. And who the devil might *he* be?' he added, staring jaw-dropped at the stranger stepping onto the bridge.

Extending his hand Blewitt gently moved aside the end of Lieutenant Green's musket and smiled pleasantly, one eyebrow raised.

He is Monsieur Henri Lafitte, gunnery consultant to the Lord General the Earl of Essex, and -'

He got no further. Hearing his name the Frenchman shifted his gaze to Lieutenant Green and pointed an elegant finger encased in a white kid glove, the cuff of which, Green noted sourly, was trimmed with fancy lacing.

'What eez zis mans letting not me to pass? He eez imbecile, yes? *J'ai fatigué, froid et faim. Ayez cet homme stupide enlevé de mon chemin immédiatement.*'

With a glance of mute apology at Green, Blewitt whispered, 'he says he is tired, cold and hungry and begs you let us pass immediately.'

Blewitt turned back to Lafitte. 'The Lieutenant is naturally concerned to protect the bridge Monsieur and he has his orders. I am sure he will let us pass if you will allow me to explain our business.'

The Frenchman looked at him blankly. '*Pardon?*'

Also, be sure to ask a language expert to check that you have got it right; it is highly likely that at least some of your readers will speak it better than you do!

Beware repetition

Don't use the same words too often. An azure sky creates a lovely image the first time you use it. By the end of the book if you have too many azure skies your readers will be screaming for black clouds and rain!

Make sure you have not used the same word twice in the same or in following-on sentences unless it is intentional: "*He shouted and shouted!*" is fine but "*He shouted down the stairs. A moment later she shouted back. In the street, the kids were shouting ...*"

Or to use my pirate character from *Sea Witch*: "*Jesamiah **walked** to the cupboard, reached for the rum and **walked** to the chair,*" This would be better as: "*Jesamiah **walked** to the cupboard, reached for the rum and **strolled** to the chair.*"

Try not to start too many paragraphs with 'He' or 'She' or the character's name – it makes reading tedious and is lazy writing! Compare the following two paragraphs; which sounds better?

This:

Jesamiah ducked below the door lintel and met with the warm fug of steaming woollen coats, male sweat, tobacco, lamp-oil and smoke. A dozen men sat at tables made from old barrels. The entire room fell stone silent as he strolled in and crossed to the bar where a sallow-faced doxie was propped up by her elbow.

Jesamiah normally would have gone straight to lean alongside her, with a rum in one hand and one of her well endowed breasts in the other. Ah well, business had to come first.

Jesamiah smiled at her ...

Or this:

Ducking in below the door lintel, **Jesamiah** met with the warm fug of steaming woollen coats, male sweat, tobacco, lamp-oil and smoke. A dozen men sat at tables made from old barrels. The entire room fell stone silent as he strolled in and crossed to the bar where a sallow-faced doxie was propped up by her elbow.

Normally, **Jesamiah** would have gone straight to lean alongside her, with a rum in one hand and one of her well endowed breasts in the other. Ah well, business had to come first.

He smiled at her...

Similarly, try to construct your sentences so that your readers do not have to puzzle out to which person 'she', 'her', 'he' or 'him' belongs. If they get it wrong, it can play havoc with your story!

Don't bend over backwards trying to think of alternatives to the word 'said'. In fact, 'said' is almost invisible to the reader's eye, while 'retorted'; 'responded'; 'interjected'; 'voiced'; 'replied'; 'answered'; 'commented' - and so on, jump off the page if used too often or inappropriately. On the other hand, do not have lines and lines of "he said, she said, he said". If your dialogue is well-structured, it is rarely necessary.

In the following example, there are six instances of ‘said’:

Furious, Jesamiah leapt towards Dunwoody, picked him up as if he were a sack of cabbages and tossed him overboard. Such was the general low opinion of the foul man, even the militia, settling themselves into the row-boat, laughed.

Peering down into the dark sea, at the spluttering, splashing object, Jennings disdainfully shook his head and **said**. “Take no notice of him, Jesamiah. He is a worm with an acid tongue. Unfortunately, I suppose we will have to fish him out.” He stepped down on to the first ladder-rung as his men began to haul an incensed Dunwoody from the water.

He **said** quietly, “Vernon will come Jes lad, later tonight or early tomorrow. He has already **said** to Rogers that he intends to commission the *Sea Witch*. Apart from the Challenger she’s the only seaworthy vessel in harbour. If you fight for her he will shoot you. If you try to run, Rogers will outlaw you.” Jennings nodded towards the *Challenger*, **said**, “She has twice the men and twice the gun power. Although the *Sea Witch* is faster and the better ship to handle, unless you can catch Vernon on the hop you will be blasted to pieces before you get half way out the harbour. Do not even consider the idea, even though most of her crew, and Vernon himself, are ashore rounding up suitable men to press into service.”

Jennings sighed, had the fool listened to a single word he had **said**? He had liberally sprinkled hints and information, hoped it had not all fallen on closed ears, he could hardly speak any plainer.

“Good luck, Jes lad,” he **said** under his breath. “Use your wits and your skill. Don’t let me down boy. Please don’t let me down.”

Cleaned up this now reads: (**bold** words are additions, ~~strike through~~ are deletions)

Furious, Jesamiah leapt towards Dunwoody, picked him up as if he were a sack of cabbages and tossed him overboard. Such was the general low opinion of the foul man, even the militia, settling themselves into the row-boat, laughed.

Peering down into the dark sea, at the spluttering, splashing object, Jennings disdainfully shook his head ~~and said~~. “Take no notice of him, Jesamiah. He is a worm with an acid tongue. Unfortunately, I suppose we will have to fish him out.” He stepped down on to the first ladder-rung as his men began to haul an incensed Dunwoody from the water.

He **paused**, ~~said~~ quietly, “Vernon will come Jes lad, later tonight or early tomorrow. He has already ~~said to~~ **informed** Rogers that he intends to commission the *Sea Witch*. Apart from the *Challenger* she’s the only seaworthy vessel in harbour. If you fight for her he will shoot you. If you try to run, Rogers will outlaw you.” Jennings nodded towards the *Challenger*, ~~said~~ “She has twice the men and twice the gun power. Although the *Sea Witch* is faster and the better ship to handle, unless you can catch Vernon on the hop you will be blasted to pieces before you get half way out the harbour. Do not even consider the idea, even though most of her crew, and Vernon himself, are ashore rounding up suitable men to press into service.”

Jennings sighed, had the fool listened to a single word ~~he had said~~? He had liberally sprinkled hints and information, hoped it had not all fallen on closed ears, he could hardly speak any plainer.

“Good luck, Jes lad,” he ~~said~~ **murmured** under his breath. “Use your wits and your skill. Don’t let me down boy. Please don’t let me down.”

Now there is only one ‘said’.

That, and, but.

Try not to over-use these words:

"It would be interesting to meet a pirate," Tiola announced, turning to smile at the Captain. "Do they all have peg legs **and** eye patches **and** gold teeth?"

The Captain smiled at her naive innocence. "Alas child, the pirates **that** I have had the misfortune to cross a course with, have all been dirt-grimed drunkards with two legs **and** black, foul teeth **and** even fouler language **and** manners."

The older woman, Jenna, drew in her breath, horrified.

"You have my word, dear lady **that** they will not be setting foot upon this ship." The Captain half saluted his two passengers **and** strolled astern, issuing calm **and** unhurried orders as he went.

Tiola linked her arm through Jenna's. "He knows what he is doing **and** we must trust him."

Jenna snorted. For all **that** he was a gentleman, through most of her forty years of life she had never found **that** a reason to trust a man.

None of the 'thats' and few of the 'ands' in this passage are necessary – it is poor writing and tedious to read (and edit!).

Often, a comma or semicolon is better:

"It would be interesting to meet a pirate," Tiola announced, turning to smile at the Captain. "Do they all have peg legs, eye patches **and** gold teeth?"

The Captain smiled at her naive innocence. "Alas child, the pirates I have had the misfortune to cross a course with, have all been dirt-grimed drunkards with two legs, black, foul teeth, even fouler language **and** manners."

The older woman, Jenna, drew in her breath, horrified.

"You have my word, dear lady, they will not be setting foot upon this ship." The Captain half saluted his two passengers **and** strolled astern, issuing calm, unhurried orders as he went.

Tiola linked her arm through Jenna's. "He knows what he is doing; we must trust him."

Jenna snorted. For all he was a gentleman, through most of her forty years of life she had never found a reason to trust a man.

Similarly, with but:

Tiola shivered again. She was not afraid **but** the child she was had too much liking for the romance of adventure, **but** the ageless woman, the part of her that carried the inherited gift of Craft passed down through alternate generations, grandmother to granddaughter, was not afraid of anything. Aside, the Captain knew exactly what he was doing.

But equally, however, these pirates rapidly closing in appeared to be as competent in their trade.

Tiola shivered again. She was not afraid, the child she was had too much liking for the romance of adventure, and the ageless woman, the part of her that carried the inherited gift of Craft passed down through alternate generations, grandmother to granddaughter, was not afraid of anything. Aside, the Captain knew exactly what he was doing.

Equally however, these pirates rapidly closing on the Christina Giselle appeared to be as competent in their trade.

Although in theory it is grammatically incorrect to start a sentence with ‘And’ or ‘But’, in creative writing it can be a useful technique, particularly where it is necessary to link two sentences, especially where one is, perhaps, a little long. And while it can evoke immediacy or emphasis, as in the example below, it is unwise to use the technique too often. Not only will it lose its impact, but it smacks of lazy writing.

Excitement was shivering down Tiola's spine. Real pirates! All the stories she had read of daring adventures: Sir Francis Drake and his expeditions against the Spanish; Captain Morgan's famous sacking of Panama and Portobello; William Dampier, whose exploits had led him to sail twice around the seas of the world, and who was even now on a third journey. **And** Captain William Kidd, whose pirate bones had bleached from where they dangled on the gallows at London's Wapping docks.

Contractions ('hasn't'; 'didn't'; 'wasn't'; 'isn't', etc.)

It is best to restrict your use of contractions to dialogue; indeed, if you do not, your characters' conversations will seem unnatural since this is how most of us speak. Contractions are widely – if incorrectly - used in magazine articles and administrative publications because it conveys a sense of informality, as though the author is speaking to you personally. However; unless you are writing someone's thoughts (we tend to think in contractions as well as speak them) it is preferable not to use them in narrative; it is bad grammar. It is also a useful way of conveying “old fashioned” speech in historical novels: modern “isn't it?” can usefully become “is it not?”

Anachronisms

This is perhaps more of a problem for writers of historical fiction, but whatever your genre, make sure you get the detail right. Readers are quick to spot inaccuracies. An incorrect description of an actual place or a misdated reference to a real event, and you will lose your readers' confidence. It can be enough to ruin the entire novel for them.

Spot the two anachronisms in the following example?

Naturally, Captain Taylor possessed his Letter of Marque giving him government permission to harass enemy ships, and naturally, he preyed on any Spanish or French enemy ship daring to show a sail over the horizon. He saw no reason to ignore everything else also coming within range of his cannon though, British or Dutch ships included. He paid no mind to the fact that this was not privateering, but piracy - a crime punishable by the death penalty of hanging.

"Show British colours, let her think we're friendly," he called down. He winked at Daniel. "We take the trader, put a scratch crew aboard then think about motoring after the other one as well, eh? What say you, young Wickersley?"

Daniel grinned a half-moon smile at Taylor, a fairer, more profitable captain than his previous one aboard an English Royal Navy frigate. "Ok sir, sounds good t'me!"

A clue: they are in the eighth and last lines!

Sex!

If you are writing an adult novel, there is no reason why you should not include graphic sex scenes if that is what you want to do. These days there are few holds barred! Generally, though, avoid gratuitous sex that adds nothing to your story. And of course, *never* write anything vulgar or offensive. If you want to stop at the bedroom door and leave your readers to imagine what goes on behind it; that is fine. If you decide to move into the bedroom, try to overcome the shrinking violet approach that forbids you to mention a body part - and resist the euphemism 'manhood.' If you cannot bring yourself to write the word 'penis', leave it out. Acclaimed novelist, the late, great, Dorothy Dunnett, managed to write extremely poignant and erotic love scenes without using any graphic descriptions whatsoever; the trick is to capture the *emotions*. But it is your choice.

A word or two about cutting

So, you have washed all the dirt away from your lump of rock and can see the sparkle coming through. Before you begin to polish, there is almost certainly some cutting and shaping to be done. Cutting out passages from your novel is arguably the most difficult task you have to do – sometimes excruciatingly so. Learn to be ruthless. Ask the all-important question: is this passage *crucial* to the plot? Alternatively, is it *key* to the development of the *main* characters.

Incidentally, there is no point in developing a minor character any more than is essential for a readers' understanding of that character's interactions and behaviour, especially if you have a cast that would put an epic blockbuster movie to shame. Minor characters do not need to be remembered, so do not need to be painted in detail – unless they are essential for some other reason (maybe they are to appear in a sequel?). Agatha Christie's plots were made deliberately misleading by identifying all her characters to throw the reader off the scent of "who done it", but generally the rule is: only the main characters get all the attention.

If you cannot, hand on heart, say 'yes' to a scene being imperative to your plot, then it has to go. No matter that you have slaved and sweated for hours over the passage that, in your opinion, is the best piece of prose you have *ever* written. Sorry, but if it don't further the story, there ain't no place for it in your book. Don't throw it away, though; keep it in a separate file of cuttings; it may be just the thing for your next book.

I have a file chock full of deleted whole chapters – in fact my original draft for *Sea Witch* started 55 pages earlier than the final version; roughly 23,000 words, but the opening was too slow, it was not what I was looking for, so it went - but I might make those cut pages into a separate book one day.

First chapter

It is critical to get the opening right. Many readers in a bookstore will choose a book solely on the basis of the first paragraph. Amazon has a "search inside" facility that shows only the first few pages. You need to hook your reader from the very first line, then keep reeling them in.

* "Mermaid was moving fast, the ship bowling along, her canvas billowing, cordage creaking and straining. She climbed over the next wave her bow lifting to linger a moment before swooping down into another deluge of spray. Completing the seesaw movement her stern soared high as the roller trundled beneath her keel. The wind smelt of hot, dry and dusty land, of jungle and grass savannah. Of Africa.

The look-out, clad in an old shirt and sailor's breeches, was perched high in the crosstrees one hundred and thirty feet above the deck. Excited, he pointed to the horizon. "Over there Jesamiah, that's where I saw 'er! I swear I saw a sail!"

With the ease of years of practice, Jesamiah Acorne stepped from the rigging on to the narrow platform that swayed with the lift and plunge of the ship...

I have not gone to press with any of my seven adult novels using the original first chapter. In *The Kingmaking*, *Shadow of the King* and *Harold the King* my openings became the second chapters. In *A Hollow Crown* I moved my first paragraph to the opening chapter of Part Four. Similarly, I substantially altered the opening of *Pirate Code*. With *Pendragon's Banner*, the second chapter was the original opening (although this was technically half way through the book - it just happened that my manuscript became the first book and a half of what was to become a trilogy). I had started with Gwenhwyfar (Guinevere), but eventually decided to open with my main character, King Arthur, rather than his wife.

Compare this opening: (chapter one, *Pendragon's Banner*)

* With an exhausted grunt of effort Arthur, the Pendragon, raised his sword and with a deep intake of breath brought it down through the full force of weight and momentum into the skull of an Anglian thegn. Another battle. Arthur was four and twenty years of age, had been proclaimed Supreme King over Greater and Less Britain three years past by the army of the British - and had been fighting to keep the royal torque secure around his neck ever since.

With this first sentence of chapter two, (*Pendragon's Banner*)

Although the water was not as warm as she would have liked, Gwenhwyfar elected to stay a little longer in the main pool of Lindum's only remaining bath-house.

This does not have the same impact for an *opening* scene. Re-read the two openings marked * again - the reader is straight in with the action and therefore hooked into the story.

It is much the best to bring your *main* character into the first chapter – even into your opening sentence – to plant your hero or heroine firmly in the reader's mind and leave no doubt that he or she is THE most important person in the story. As a reader I find it irritating to start a relationship with a character in chapter one only to find he is of minor importance and has disappeared by the end chapter two.

A few do nots for your opening chapter:

- Do not stroll into the story, be sharp and succinct.
- Do not give too much description of what your character looks like on the first page; strive for a brief image and add to it gradually.
- Do not give the entire plot away – let the story unfold as the reader turns the pages.
- Try to end each chapter with a hook.
- Do not use long, rambling sentences.
- If you must use a prologue or a foreword then be sure to keep it short and snappy – and *never* more than a page in length – otherwise, why isn't it chapter 1?
- The same goes for postscripts or epilogues. You have gone to the bother of finishing on an exciting or thought-provoking note, bringing the story to a breathtaking climax. By adding several more pages, you risk undoing all the intensity you have created and making the story 'fall flat': the reader's lasting impression may be that your book was a bit dull after all. If you must add something, keep it short and to the point. Think of a roller-coaster ride; you expect it to end on a quivering thrill – how disappointing after that final stomach-churning drop to find there is a mile of flat track to be covered before you reach the end of the ride.

A few do's

- Do hook your reader, entice him or her in
- Do introduce your main character as soon as possible
- Do give an idea of your character's environment (where and when) so readers can orientate their minds from the first moment. Nothing puts a reader off more than not knowing what on earth you are talking about.

Last chapter

Ending your story is as important as starting it. This is especially true if you want your readers to come back again to a sequel or your next book. Your aim is for your readers to put down your book with a sigh of satisfaction – or to be thinking about what they have just read and regretting it has ended.

Even if you intend to write a sequel, don't leave threads untied or the plot unfinished. It may seem an obvious thing to say, but a novel must have a *start*, a *middle* and an *end* – even if it is the first of a series.

In my first rough synopses for both *Pendragon's Banner* and *Sea Witch* I had originally intended to add a few extra chapters. *Sea Witch* was going to have Jesamiah at the helm sailing away into the sunset. *Pendragon's Banner* was to end with Arthur victorious and burying the one who dies (I am deliberately being secretive here so as to not spoil the story!). When I came to write the chapters that are now the endings, I just *knew* I had to finish there. It felt right to stop. The extra chapters never got written. If you are not sure where to finish, think of how movies or the TV soaps end. Always on a "high", thoughtful or "ahh wasn't that nice", note.

The title

So long as you have a working title that motivates you to write, the *actual* title is not important until you can't leave it any longer to decide (i.e. as your book is about to be printed). I am afraid there is not a lot of advice to give: the right title is right, the wrong one isn't. It is one of those: 'you will know it when you see it' syndromes. If you are stumped for ideas, both the Bible and Shakespeare are good places to look.

It is advisable to choose a title that reflects the subject matter of your story or it might not be picked off the shelf by its intended readership. Jo Field's working title for her novel about the English Civil War, was *A Kind of Twilight*. It was taken from a contemporary quote, sounded evocative and to Jo, seemed to fit her hero's inner conflict. But there was no way of guessing from this that it was an historical adventure story, so after much heartache she renamed her novel *Rogues & Rebels*; also taken from a 17th Century quote, but giving potential readers a much better flavour of what the book is about.

Try to avoid using a title that has already been used – although there is nothing to say you can't, but if you use *Rogues & Rebels*, for instance, you may find that people are buying Jo's book and not yours. Google for your chosen title or search for it on Amazon, see what comes up.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is ***copying!*** You cannot be sued for using an *idea* that is similar to one used before (look at how many versions of the King Arthur stories there are!). Nor can you be sued for using the same character's name – but you would be ill-advised to copy something too closely; Harry is fine to use, but someone has already used *Harry Potter* (envy, envy!). There are several books about wizards learning how to be wizards at a wizard's school, for instance, but there is only *one* Harry Potter at Hogwarts fighting against the evils of Voldemort.

You cannot copy something word for word from another author, either in a few scattered sentences or for pages on end. For instance:

Jesamiah, Captain Acorne, lay awake, unable to sleep. He watched the intermittent flicker of lightning and listened to the distant thunder as it trundled away out to sea. In the main part of the cabin, rain was beating against the skylight and the five stern windows, was drumming on the wooden deck above. From the far side of the harbour, the cracked bell in Nassau's dilapidated church rang the hour of ten several minutes slow, the sound tinny and distorted.

A plagiarised version of this original paragraph might read:

Captain Andrews lay awake watching the flicker of lightning and listening to the thunder as it rolled away out to sea. In the main cabin rain was beating against the skylight and the stern windows. From the other side of the harbour, the cracked bell in the dilapidated church rang nine o'clock.

Whereas...

Captain Andrews lay listening to the rain beating on the stern windows of his ship, the *Mary Anne*. He had been awake for hours, unable to sleep. The thunder had gone, and the sound of the church clock striking the hour of nine drifted across the harbour.

... is sufficiently different to avoid being accused of plagiarism (although substitute *Acorne* for *Andrews*, and it happens to be the opening paragraph of *Pirate Code*, so you might be in trouble if I spotted it!)

It is the author's responsibility to not plagiarise other authors' work. Don't do it. You won't get away with it. If you feel you owe a debt of gratitude for an *idea*, then it is a courtesy to say so in your acknowledgements. Similarly, if you use a direct quote, seek the author's permission if he or she is still alive – and even if not, it should still be acknowledged. The same applies if you use research details; this is not plagiarism, but your source should be acknowledged. If in doubt, don't use it.

SECTION 4

SO, YOU HAVE WRITTEN A BOOK? THE EDICTS OF EDITING

The final polishing

So, your book is finished, after many months and several re-written drafts you are finally content with the result. The End.

Not quite. Too many “wanna-be” writers make the mistake of sending their treasured labour of love straight off to an agent or publisher. Don’t be tempted. Yes, if it is picked up by a mainstream publisher they will pay for it to be copy-edited, but you have to be certain the book is good before you post it off.

Your final draft should be scanned by a fresh pair of eyes, so get someone you trust to read it through and make constructive criticism. Preferably, hire a professional copy-editor to do it for you, as you are unlikely to spot all the errors yourself. Are you aware that it is possible to read quite adroitly even when several vowels are misspelled? The eye has an annoying habit of correcting errors as you read; a trained copy-editor will usually avoid this pitfall. Be sure to present an editor/publisher with a novel that is *ready* for editing/publishing though – iron out all the wrinkles I have mentioned above first.

In a basic copy-edit, the editor will ensure that blue eyes stay blue; check spelling - and unlike a spellchecker, will take note of context! - grammar, consistency of capitalisation, and punctuation. (We have not touched on punctuation in these notes, but recommend you read *Eats Shoots & Leaves* by Lynne Truss.) Your copy-editor will also check the sequence of chapter numbering and warn you if there are potential copyright issues (i.e. you have quoted someone else’s work without permission), but flaws in plot, wording, writing technique and characterisation will *not* be noted in a basic copy-edit. If your manuscript contains many of the common mistakes discussed in this article, they will remain, for it is not a copy-editor’s job to re-draft a novel that does not come up to scratch. Some will, but only if you are prepared to pay the necessarily substantial fee.

If you are intending to self-publish, then it is worth considering a *full* - as opposed to a basic - copy-edit. Most self- or assisted publishing companies will not give you this option and it may be worth your while to engage the services of an independent editor. A full edit can be done *only* by someone else, not yourself, for you will be too close to the work and unable to see the wood for the trees. You wrote that chapter, so of *course* you know what you meant. You may be quite unaware that it will make no sense at all to your readers. You may think you mentioned, for example, Jesamiah’s gold earring earlier in the book, so having him fiddle with it half way through the story seems perfectly acceptable – except you have forgotten you took the early reference out! An editor will notice.

In a full copy-edit, a good editor will spark ideas; suggest ways in which the story might be enhanced, the plot thickened. An editor can tell you that this bit of the story is too slow for the action; this chapter almost the same as the one before. The next chapter takes the story nowhere – or you need another chapter to explain something. Your editor will tell

you where a scene needs linking or that your character is behaving ‘out of character’; will ensure the continuity runs smoothly; alert you to a character who makes one appearance early in the novel and never appears again – is he therefore needed? - will maybe check that certain facts *are* facts i.e. “*Jesamiah added up the money, twelve gold pieces and six silver; that made seventeen.*” Your editor will (usually!) spot the error.

A good editor is a treasure, for she or he can help turn a mediocre novel into a good one, and a good one into an exceptional one. Value your editor and treat him or her like gold-dust (I had to put that in as my editor – Jo - will be editing and contributing to these notes! But actually, I happen to believe it is true.)

However; it is *not* an editor’s brief to change your style or alter your voice. If there is anything that doesn’t sound right, an editor is duty bound to point it out, but the decision to keep it as it is or change it is *yours* alone. A good book will be produced by collaboration: work closely with your editor and take note of what she or he suggests – but never forget it is *your* book. If you are uncertain, think about it for a few days then decide. If you agree, change it, if not, leave it.

The final stages

As the author, *you* are responsible for the polishing of your diamond, *not* your publisher. The final check before going to press is down to you. Your book is accepted and type-set. At last, your work will look like a real book, but it still needs proofreading to pick up on errors that slipped through the copy-editing process, or were generated during type-setting.

You will be sent either page proofs, i.e. loose pages bearing crop marks and with the print set out as it will look once bound, or the same thing in the form of a pdf computer file. I prefer to ask for page proofs in hard copy, but not all self-/assisted-publishers will offer this option.

I strongly advise you to ensure your last proofread is done on hard copy even if that means printing out the pdf file yourself. It is a curious fact that errors on the printed page, particularly when it is book-sized, are *much* more obvious than on-screen. If you are fortunate to have a good copy-editor, she or he may offer an additional proofreading service, and, strange but true, you will both almost certainly spot a different set of errors.

And then, finally, your finished book arrives. Proudly you open it at random - and you spot a typing error. Eeeeeeeek! Ah well, even the best diamonds can have a small flaw...

A cautionary tale: The first edition of *Pendragon’s Banner* somehow ended up with the most horrendous typo that was not in my original manuscript. Here’s the opening chapter again...

With an exhausted grunt of effort Arthur, the Pendragon, raised his sword and with a deep intake of breath brought it down through the full force of weight and momentum into the skull of an Anglian thegn. Another battle. Arthur was four and twenty years of age, had been proclaimed Supreme King over Greater and Less Britain three years past by the army of the British - and had been fighting to keep the royal torque secure around his neck ever since.

Did you spot the mistake? ‘Anglian’, as in East Anglian pagan warrior, was printed as ‘Anglican’, as in Church of England, an expression not coined until some 50 years after Arthur’s supposed death!. I was horrified, but there was nothing I could do until the book was re-published in paperback six months later. The USA version of *The Kingmaking* was erroneously printed from an uncorrected proof copy. Complete with the 360+ errors. I still laugh at Arthur’s bread-stubbed – as opposed to beard-stubbed – chin, though!

Unfortunately, I continue to receive the occasional rude e-mail message or derogatory comment on Amazon.com about this. I assure you, I am as annoyed about it as are those readers. So – the message is: *never* let a publisher print your uncorrected proofs, insist on reading through your work, yet again, before going to press.

Recommended Reading

These notes were intended only to touch on a few of the more common errors that arise in novice writing and to show ways in which inexperienced novelists might improve their writing skills and thus their chances of getting their novels published. For more in-depth advice, there are scores of ‘How To’ books designed to help and encourage new writers; we have selected just three of our personal favourites:

- *Write Away* by Elizabeth George: although best known for her thrillers, most notably the ‘Inspector Lynley Mysteries’, George’s book is relevant to writers of all genres, easy to follow and packed full of good advice.
- *From Pitch to Publication* by Carole Blake: published in 1999, but still highly relevant. Everything you ever wanted to know about getting your novel published by a mainstream publishing house.
- *Eats Shoots & Leaves* by Lynne Truss: a fabulous book that takes the mystery out of punctuation and is as entertaining as it is informative - and a best-seller to boot!

In addition, a good dictionary is a must; there are several from which to choose, but the *New Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors: The Essential A-Z Guide to the Written Word* is a handy size and extremely helpful.

For a list of publishers and agents, and for helpful hints and tips about publishing, the annual *Writer’s and Artists Year Book (UK)* is the industry standard.

Lastly, there are one or two good glossies aimed at would-be authors, such as the monthly *Writing Magazine*, which is full of hints and tips, interesting articles for authors by authors, lists of helpful books and news about the markets.

EPILOGUE

(Well we did say our tips and advice are not set in stone!)

We have left this comment to the end, but in fact wonder if it should have been inserted at the start and repeated at regular intervals throughout.

In a word: **READ!** We are often asked for advice by novice writers, many of whom confess: 'I never have time to read – I am much too busy writing.'

Our advice is – and we cannot say it strongly enough - then *make* time! Read, read and read other people's work. Reading feeds the imagination. For a body to glow with health and perform properly it needs nourishment. The mind – and in particular, the imagination - is no different. If you do not read how will you find your way into the world of imagination? If you do not read, you will only occasionally peep through the keyhole and your skills will stagnate not expand.

Reading is the very best way to learn how to write and to understand how published authors have achieved what you hope to – **and will** – achieve.

Good luck! We wish you a best seller!

Helen Hollick has written eight books to date. Her historical novels, *The Kingmaking*, *Pendragon's Banner*, *Shadow of the King*, *A Hollow Crown* and *Harold the King* were first published by William Heinemann (Random House UK) and are currently published by Discovered Authors (Diamonds).

Sea Witch and *Pirate Code*, being the first two voyages of Cpt. Jesamiah Acorne, are published by Discovered Authors (Diamonds). The next book in the series, *Bring it Close*, is scheduled for publication next year.

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Should you find these notes helpful, please show your appreciation by making a small donation to a charity of your choice. Our chosen charities would be: The Royal British Legion (Poppy Day Appeal) [USA - Veterans' Day]; N.S.P.C.C. (National Society of Prevention of Cruelty to Children); any local hospice; The Red Cross [Red Crescent]; Dogs Trust UK; Cats' Protection League UK; WWF (World Wildlife Fund).

Alternatively, buy something in your local charity/thrift shop and tell them to keep the change. Thank you.

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