

# **Signature's 2018 Ultimate Writing Guide**



*presented with*

**C R E A T I V E L I V E**

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# COMMIT



# 6 Essential Don'ts for Writers

by KAREN WHITE

I always get a little squirmy when I'm asked to give advice on writing. I mean, what makes me an authority on the subject? Sure, I've written a bunch of books, but the only "training" I've had in my chosen vocation is the thousands of books I've read in my lifetime so far.

I'd like to think that despite not having a lot of experience or knowledge about the whole writing thing when I started, surely I've learned something along the way. And I have.

In that vein, here are a few nuggets of wisdom I've gleaned in my nearly twenty years of being a published author. No, I haven't figured out the magic formula that will grant a writer instant success. But I have accumulated a nice list of what *not* to

do if you're planning on having a career as a writer.

**1. Do not spend all your writing time making excuses as to why you can't write instead of actually writing.** Excuses will not write a book. Finding the perfect time to finally start a book is like choosing the right time to move to another country and start a new life. There will never be a perfect time, as there will always be reasons why the timing isn't optimal. If you have a burning desire to write a book (or move to another country), make it a priority. The rest will fall into place, and you'll be a lot happier with yourself.

**2. Do not take to heart everyone else's writing style/advice/methods before you've given yourself a chance to figure out**

***If you have a burning desire to write a book, make it a priority. The rest will fall into place, and you'll be a lot happier with yourself.***

**your own.** Writing is incredibly personal. There are as many writing techniques and styles as there are writers. It's what gives us our individual writer's voice. It's precious and unique and you need to own it and not dilute it with external influences before you've given it a chance to sprout. If I'd listened to all the well-meaning advice when I started (don't write in first person, never start a sentence with "and," outline everything before you write the first sentence), I would never have written my first book.

**3. Do not surround yourself with naysayers.** For whatever reason, there will always be people in our lives who will attempt to discourage us from our pursuits. Either family members, friends, or other writers will have negative things to say about our talent (or lack thereof). Don't listen to them. It's always easier to be a critic than the warrior fighting the battle. Just remember that it's not about them. Your writing is between you and the words on the page. And nobody else.

**4. Do not wait until the muse strikes before you sit down to**

**write.** This one always makes me laugh. I would have written exactly three pages in my entire career if this were true. In my previous life in the business world, I don't imagine I would have lasted in any job very long if my attitude had been that I'd only show up for work when I felt like it. There are usually about a million other things I'd rather be doing than gluing myself to my chair and getting to work. Since I consider writing my career and not just a hobby, I treat it with respect.

**5. Do not say my family/job/life isn't conducive to writing a book.** News flash: Unless you're independently wealthy and your family is entirely self-sufficient, this will never change. I wrote my first books in my SUV at the football field and horse barn while my children practiced. My husband traveled about ninety percent of the time for his job so I was basically a single mom for most of the week. Instead of chatting with the other mothers, or reading a magazine, or napping, I used that time to write. There are pockets of time in each of our lives that we can prioritize as writing time. Expect

to let go of a few things (binge watching on Netflix, hanging out on Facebook, sleeping in on weekends) to find the time. But the time is there if you're willing to make your writing happen.

**6. Do not expect that the hard work is over after you sell your first book.** Nope. It's only just beginning. To prepare yourself for your writing career, start thinking about your next book as soon as you send your first book proposal to prospective agents and editors. You've got momentum so make the most of it.

Writers write. It's what we do. We turn off the negative voices, we create the time and the place, and we write. To borrow words from Nike, just do it.

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KAREN WHITE is the author of *The Guests on South Battery*.



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# Discover Your Writing Voice

by JAYNE ANN KRENTZ

Give the same plot to ten different writers and you will get ten very different stories. No two will sound alike. Why? Because every author brings a unique voice to the craft of writing. Voice is everything when it comes to telling a story.

It isn't clever plot twists or deep character insights or detailed descriptions that draw a reader back again and again to a particular writer — it's the writer's voice. Just to make things even more complicated, the truth is that no two people respond to a writer's voice in exactly the same way. Some readers will

never be compelled by your voice. With luck, others will fall in love with it.

Voice is hard to define because it's a mix of so many things — your core values, your world view, your personality, your sense of optimism or cynicism or despair or anger or bitterness or hope — all those things are bound up in your storytelling voice.

And then there's the craft aspect.

You can write successfully for your entire career without giv-

ing a moment's thought to your voice. But just as knowing and understanding your core story can be extremely useful at various points in your career, so, too, is having a clear sense of your voice. If you comprehend its strengths and weaknesses you will be able to figure out how to sharpen it and make it more powerful.

How do you identify your writing voice? Here's a simple exercise: Write a scene from start to finish. It should be a scene that is infused with the emotions, themes, or conflicts that compel you as a writer.



# ***There is nothing that will kill a writing career faster than storytelling that bores the reader.***

It is helpful to think of scenes as short stories. They have a beginning that engages the reader, a middle in which emotional and often physical action takes place, and an endpoint that either resolves the narrative or provides a cliffhanger that leads into the next scene.

Give your scene to a couple of people to read. These should be people you trust. Make it clear that you do not want a writing critique. You are not interested in their opinion of your characters or your plot. You want one response, and one only, to the following question: "What is your emotional takeaway from that scene?"

Did you make your reader's pulse kick up? Did you arouse curiosity? Anger? Sympathy?

Did you scare your reader? Did you make that reader want to know what happens next? Your goal is to identify the single strongest emotion that the reader experienced while reading your scene. That response will help you analyze the strengths and weaknesses of your voice. The worst possible reaction from a reader is no emotional reaction at all. There is nothing that will kill a writing career faster than storytelling that bores the reader.

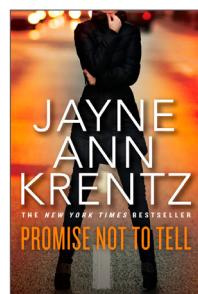
Put the most engaging elements of your voice on display in the very first sentence of your book. Readers will not give you a few pages or a couple of chapters to get the story going. You must draw the reader into your world from the very first sentence, and you do that with your voice.

Listen to your writing voice. It will tell you what kinds of stories you will write with the most power. Once you have figured out your voice, do everything you can to strengthen it and make it more compelling.

Voice is your superpower. Discover it.

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JAYNE ANN KRENTZ is the author of *Promise Not to Tell*.



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# To Outline or Not? Do What Works for You

by JASMINE GUILLORY

Sometimes when looking at writing advice, it seems like there's One True Way to be a writer, and that if you just take the advice of the person who argues their case well enough, you'll crack the code and get there. I'm here to tell you that, as much as it can seem like it, there's no one way to be a writer. Writers come in all sorts of styles, previous professions, attitudes towards writing, and everything you can think of. What's most important, especially when starting out, is that you try out different ways of writing and see what works best for you. And I think one of the ways that's the most essential is for the question that everyone asks: Do you outline?

I was a history major in college,

but long before that, I was a serious outline devotee. I think I used an outline for everything major I ever wrote throughout my many years of school, and continuing on to my legal practice. So when I decided to write a novel, it seemed like second nature to me to outline. But after I finished that (unpublished) novel, I read so much writing advice that had the general message that outlines were for suckers. Real writers could just have an IDEA, and then sit down and the words would FLOW. My first book was getting a bunch of rejections, and I had another idea, so I thought, okay, I'll just try to start with that and see what happens!

Here's what happened: I wrote the first half of that book three



times, and finally abandoned it. The problem was that my idea only lasted me through the first quarter or so of the book, and I had no idea what could or should happen in the middle. I had a beginning, and a vague idea for an end, but I didn't know what else should be there, so I kept trying and failing to come up with something as I wrote. Maybe, I thought, I'm just not a real writer.

But then, a while later, I had another idea, about a man and a woman who get stuck in an elevator together, and by the time the elevator starts working again, he's convinced her to be his date to a wedding. I liked my idea a lot, and I knew I wanted to try to write this book, so I decided to try what had worked for me in the past: an outline. My outline wasn't very long to start with — maybe ten key scenes I knew I wanted in there — including what happened in the middle of the book — and then random notes about who I thought these two people might be and why they would have got-

ten themselves into this situation in the first place.

As I kept writing, I kept adding to my outline as I went along. I gave myself a path to follow to get through the first quarter, then the first half, then the first two thirds, and finally through the end of the first draft of the book. I took many steps off the path as I wrote, as I figured out the characters, as they became real people to me, as I realized that things I had come up with initially in my outline wouldn't work for Alexa and Drew. But I knew I needed something written down to tell me what to do when I was stuck and thinking "Oh God, what comes next?" especially when I was in that difficult middle part of the book where the end felt so far away. My outline got me to finish *The Wedding Date*, my debut novel, and I haven't attempted to write a book without an outline since.

This is not to tell you that you need an outline to get a book published; it's to say that I know I need an outline to get a book

published. And it's especially to say that at this point in my writing career, I'm so glad I tried to write without an outline and failed miserably, because now I know what works for me and what doesn't. Try writing with and without an outline, try writing at different times of day, try all sorts of writing advice you see out there. Be ready to fail, be thrilled to succeed. What's most important is getting to know yourself as a writer, and what works best for you.

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JASMINE GUILLORY is the author of *The Wedding Date*.



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# How I Revise

by CHANEL CLEETON

I frequently say that the most predictable part of my writing process is how unpredictable it is. As a writer, I'm a "pantser"—someone who drafts without plotting a great deal. Instead of utilizing an outline as I write, I favor following where the story takes me with a general idea of the book's conclusion. The journey is different for each book I write, and I frequently find surprises along the way. However, as unpredictable as penning the first draft of my novel is, my revision process never varies, and that reliable system is a source of great comfort as I hone my novel.

Once I've finished the first draft of my manuscript, I implement my tried-and-true system. I

always start with a revision pass on my computer. Since I often take months to write the initial draft, I read through the entire manuscript with the aim of getting a holistic view of the book. I'll frequently discover that something I wrote when I started the book needs to be tweaked to fall in line with where the story took me later on. This revision pass helps me gain a better sense of how the overall story is working and whether any plot holes exist or character development is needed. I'm also fixing obvious flaws that jump out at me.

After I've reacquainted myself with the book and tweaked the plot and characters as necessary, I print out a hard copy and

pull out my red pen. For me, this is where the magic happens. There's something about editing your work in print that really helps you polish your writing. I spend a lot of time at this stage working on sentence structure, word choice, and adding layers and depth to the story.

When I've finished this second pass, I email the updated manuscript to my e-reader. I've found that I am much more likely to catch typos, mistakes, and awkward phrasing when I change the medium with which I view my book. If I'm used to looking at it a certain way, it's easy to skip over things, but with variety, it feels fresh each time I revise. At this level, I'm mainly doing the never-ending typo

***I push through with the knowledge that the revision process will provide an opportunity to make the book shine.***

search as well as cleaning up any awkward phrasing. I'll also look for any formatting issues that jump out at me that make the manuscript less readable in a digital format, like unwieldy paragraphs.

Following these three revision passes, I usually take a step back and decide if I'm happy with the book, or if it needs more tweaking. The digital pass really informs that decision, because it's the draft when I truly read the book as a reader would. If there are still things that are pulling me out of the story, or something isn't working for me, I'll restart the revision process and go through each step again. Some books only need three revision passes before I'm comfortable sending them to my editor

(and then we start the editorial process); others need nine or more revision passes. The goal is to reach the point where I'm not making significant changes at the e-reader stage.

Because I often start writing a book with a skeleton of an idea and I love the freedom of being able to explore the direction in which my characters and plot take me, the structure of my revision process really works as a safety net. Whenever I feel stuck in the drafting process or realize something isn't working in the book, I push through with the knowledge that the revision process will provide an opportunity to make the book shine. Whether you're a plotter or a pantser like me, I recommend taking the time to revise your

work across different mediums. It offers a fresh perspective — and you'll be surprised what you find!

---

*CHANEL CLEETON is the author of Next Year in Havana.*



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# **LOOK BEYOND YOURSELF**



# The Importance of Writing the Unfamiliar

by KATIE GANSHERT

“Write what you know.”

It’s a quote often attributed to Mark Twain, and familiar advice amongst writers. So familiar, in fact, it could be considered cliché. I have nothing against Mr. Twain, I just prefer to take those four words and raise them to six:

Write what you *want* to know.

Or better yet, write what you want to explore.

This is exactly what I did in my latest novel, *No One Ever Asked* — a story written from the

perspective of three drastically different characters.

There’s Camille Gray, wife of a corporate executive, stay-at-home mother of three, perpetual volunteer and longtime PTA chairwoman; Jen Covington, a career nurse adjusting to life as a transracial family thanks to her recently adopted seven-year-old daughter; and Anaya Jones, a first-year teacher at an affluent school district that is nothing at all like her alma mater.

The characters are fiction, but the story was inspired by true events, and explores — among

other things — implicit bias and racism, especially in the context of modern day American education.

Camille Gray is a white woman who’s never given much thought to how white her world is, or how that whiteness has shaped her. Jen Covington is also white, but her daughter is black. Because of this, Jen is increasingly aware of (and uncomfortable with) how segregated we are as a society. Anaya Jones is black, and has lived her life with a set of experiences I have never and will never have as a white

***Write what you want to know. Or better yet, write what you want to explore.***

woman in this country.

When it came to Anaya, I wasn't writing what I knew. I was writing what I wanted to know. As a white mother with a black daughter, I was writing what I'd already begun to explore.

My research was extensive.

I devoured memoirs. *The Grace of Silence* by Michele Norris. *My First White Friend* by Patricia Raybon, *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. *Men We Reaped* by Jesmyn Ward. Each one was eye-opening. Each one was unique.

I listened to podcasts. I intentionally searched for and tuned into voices that would be familiar to Anaya. They are podcasts I continue to listen to today.

I spoke with people in real life. They are everywhere, after all. At church. At work. At school. In the neighborhood. I know this one can be intimidating and

awkward. But I found that being respectful and straightforward worked best. It's not terribly hard to say something like, "Hey, I'm writing a story and I have a character who (is Muslim, is an immigrant from Mexico, has cerebral palsy) and I want to make sure I write this character well. Would you be willing to talk with me about your experience?" Then accept whatever response they give you. I found that for the most part, people enjoy talking about their life.

My editor helped me find sensitivity readers. I recommend more than one, because — and I hope this goes without saying — people who share the same religion or ethnicity or handicap are not a monolith. Everyone's journey is unique, and yet, people within the same groups share common experiences. The more feedback you get, the clearer this will become, and the less likely you will be to perpetuate

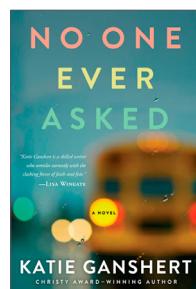
stereotypes.

All of these things helped me write what I didn't know, but was passionate about exploring. It wasn't easy. It required a lot of work. But in the end, it made for a book so much bigger than my own familiar world.

So write what you want to know. Write what you want to explore. Just make sure to put in the time and research required to do it well.

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KATIE GANSHERT is the author of *No One Ever Asked*.



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# Writing About the Tough Stuff

by SHARON BALA

I never wanted to write a book about refugees. And yet that is exactly what my debut novel, *The Boat People*, is about.

In August 2010 a rusty cargo ship arrived on Vancouver Island, off Canada's west coast. On board were nearly 500 Tamil men, women, and children, survivors of Sri Lanka's brutal civil war. Today, when anyone thinks of Canada and refugees, what they imagine is the Prime Minister welcoming Syrian families at the airport with a big smile and winter coats. But eight years ago, there was a different government in power, one that wanted nothing to do with asylum-seekers, especially ones who showed up en masse and by boat. The Tamils were labeled illegals and terrorists, husbands separated from wives, children

ripped from their parents' arms, the whole lot of them thrown into prison.

From the opposite end of the country, four time zones and 4,600 miles away, I watched the drama unfold, feeling both distant from, and connected to, the newcomers. My family is also from Sri Lanka and it is only good luck that brought us to Canada in the 1980s as immigrants instead of two decades later as refugees. I wasn't a writer in 2010, not yet. But three years later, when I sat down to draft my first novel, that ship and its passengers still haunted me.

*Write what you know.* That was the plan: to tell a story about a sprawling, multi-generational Sri Lankan family. To

explore questions of belonging and identity — national and individual — how these things are constructed and ever-changing, perhaps false. To write about the divide between immigrant parents and their western-born children, a chasm that widens with time and succeeding generations.

I planned to set the novel in Toronto, in the land-locked center of the country, and use the arrival of a refugee ship far away on the west coast as a news item, off-stage action that would provoke debate and discussion at the dinner table. A plot device to reveal character and the culture gap. This was not going to be a novel about boats and refugees. It would not be a story of war and sorrow. None of it would take place in Sri Lanka, a

# **But this was not a lesson I learned easily. We fought, my book and I, every step of the way.**

country I barely know. Nope. No way.

Almost immediately, the plan fell apart. As I researched the ship, and then by extension the war, it became clear that one of the characters would have to be

a refugee, that I'd need to write scenes set in Sri Lanka, worse still, during the war.

Stories have their own momentum. Writers can draw up elaborate plots and timelines but if a character saunters on stage with a compelling story, the enterprise is fated. Better to set aside the master plan and follow your character, let him take the lead. But this was not a lesson I learned easily. We fought, my book and I, every step of the way. Draft after draft, friends and fellow writers, my agent, my editors, even my mother, all said the same thing: "These refugees are the heart of the story. Write more about them."

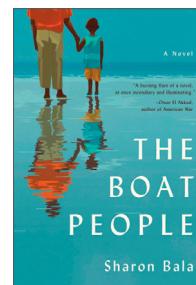
If I close my eyes and listen, I can still hear the loud, brash voices of that big, extended family, all those characters I never created. I picture them squeezed around a table, eating and talking with their hands, disagreeing, laughing, shout-

ing over and interrupting each other. I could have written that novel. It would have been easy. But it wouldn't have been any good.

Here is what I've learned: Write what you know is incomplete advice. Start with what you know. Then leave your comfort zone. Explore what you don't know, the things that frighten you. Walk toward the darkness and write from deep inside that terrifying place.

---

SHARON BALA is the author of *The Boat People*.



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# Writing Truth in Identity for the Mash-up American

by ADIB KHORRAM

In 1992, Dr. Maria P. P. Root wrote a “Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People,” which was later included in several of her books, including 1996’s *The Multiracial Experience*.

I wish I could say I had grown up with this document, or even been aware of it before researching this piece, but Dr. Root manages to encapsulate in twelve sentences what I spent an entire novel trying to express.

In *Darius the Great Is Not Okay*, Darius Kellner frequently refers to himself and his sister as “Fractional Persians,” as opposed to the “True Persians” his mother’s family in Iran represent. Growing up Iranian-American myself, I didn’t ever think of myself as “Fractional Persian.” In fact, I tried not to

think of myself as Persian at all.

I was raised in Kansas City, Missouri, in a predominantly white suburb, and it was easier

Granted, this plan would have worked a lot better if my name weren’t Adib and I didn’t have to constantly explain where my name came from.

***As I got older, I became a lot more comfortable with my Iranian heritage, and there were even times I leaned into it.***

to pretend I was 100 percent white like all my classmates.

As I got older, I became a lot more comfortable with my Iranian heritage, and there were even times I leaned into it, like in college when being Iranian made me stand out in an otherwise crowded field. (It helped that there was a very good Iranian restaurant in town that I got my classmates hooked on.)

Even now, though, I don’t know that I’ve gotten myself all figured out. Some days I feel white; some days I feel Iranian. Some days I feel both, and some days I feel neither.

I knew from the start that one of the central conflicts in Darius was going to be his sense of identity, his Fractional-ness. Firstly, because I wanted to mirror and explore my own experience, and secondly, because there are more and more Mash-Up Americans each day. Whenever I write, I'm grappling with a question I have, or a problem I'm trying to solve. In this case, it was: "What does it mean to grow up feeling like you're walking a tightrope between two different cultures?"

There are times Darius truly feels like he belongs in Iran, and others when he feels utterly out-of-place. There are pieces of his life in America that he feels perfectly at home in, and others that make it clear just how "other" the people around him perceive him.

And all of this is inextricably linked with Darius's name. Throughout the story, Darius is referred to alternately as Darius or Darioush, the Persian rendering of his name. It's not just his Iranian relatives: his own mother switches between Darius and Darioush with confusing regularity, and by the time he gets home, even he thinks of himself as Darioush sometimes.

That's because, at the end of the day, he truly is Darioush sometimes. And he is Darius sometimes. He is American sometimes, and he is Iranian sometimes. He is both sometimes, and he is neither sometimes.

These are feelings that I had growing up. And that my sister had growing up. I've heard from

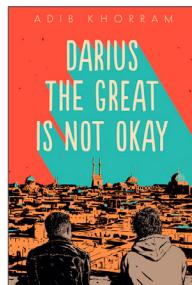
so many readers of mixed heritage that they, too, felt this way. Fractional. Hyphenate. Mash-up.

As writers, and especially writers for young people, it's our job to tell the truth. This was my truth growing up. But you know what?

I turned out okay.

---

*ADIB KHORRAM* is the author of *Darius the Great Is Not Okay*.



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# The Difficulties of Writing a Cross-Border Memoir in Today's World

by JEAN GUERRERO

I was nearly finished writing my reported memoir about my quest to understand my father, a Mexican immigrant who crosses borders both real and illusory — between countries, between madness and sanity, between substance abuse and sobriety — when Donald J. Trump was elected president of the United States.

Trump had campaigned on promises to build a bigger wall at the border — a wall he started building spring 2018. This made him, theoretically, a perfect nemesis for my father: a man whose story is defined by crossing man-made lines. My book, *CRUX: A Cross-Border Memoir*, unfolds in the context

of the existing border's creation. I grew up traveling through the country's busiest port of entry in San Diego as the body of the border materialized; now, that body was about to transform. Did I want to go back through the manuscript and weave in the plot of the new president's plans?

One of the biggest challenges of writing memoir is making our personal stories relevant to the world around us without letting them be overtaken by the headlines. Current events are always changing. As a journalist who covers immigration, I have a front-row seat to the rapid-fire metamorphosis of the border region. What makes the aver-

age book more valuable than the average news story is its longer lifespan; it speaks to something unchanging in the species. The great ones, like Isabel Allende's *Paula*, are timeless. In her memoir, Allende explores her family history as it unfolds amid political upheaval in Chile, but what motivates her is a desire not to make a relevant political statement but to save her dying daughter: "Listen, Paula. I am going to tell you a story, so that when you wake up you will not feel so lost."

Current events are rarely as interesting as the forces propelling them. The more personal the motive for writing the memoir, the more likely it is to

# **Why are some of us tempted to cross borders, while some seek to strengthen them? Is one way better than the other?**

illuminate the hidden drivers of others. I don't mean to suggest that a single policy decision or newsworthy event can't devastate a life or that it shouldn't be included in a memoir. But current events are symptoms of the past. The recurring patterns that fuel them can inform a diagnosis. Those patterns lie inside of ourselves.

The border and I have an intimate relationship that has nothing to do with President Trump. It has to do with my father, who instilled in me my journalistic curiosity before he ran away to flee alleged CIA persecutors. In what I believe is my first memory, Papi is making me hallucinate. I am sitting on his lap in an airplane and he reaches through the window to touch a cloud. Inspired, I plunge my own fingers into the cloud. I know this is impossible, but for years I recalled this with such clarity that I thought airplane regulations in the late 1980s allowed for open windows. Now I know that, surely, the memory was a product of suggestion. An illusion. Papi probably pretended to stroke the cloud from behind the window, prompting my mind to dissolve the plexiglass.

My father was always encouraging me to push beyond the boundaries of material reality. The border is not just a line on a map or a fence in the earth. It is

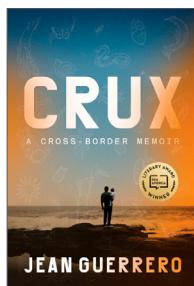
a metaphor for the line between the familiar and the unfamiliar. It is the gravity beckoning us beyond the known.

Why are some of us tempted to cross borders, while some seek to strengthen them? Is one way better than the other? Memoirs allow us to arrive at more complex answers to the issues that tend to polarize us; they show that reality is rarely as simple as good or bad. An unchecked terror of the unknown leads to the same place as an unchecked obsession with it: a world where fact and fiction are mixed up.

It is easy for memoirists to get lost in the dark and digressing corridors of our minds. But memory has orienting features: rhymes. They function as rungs in our recollections. These parallels lead us from our most intimate wounds to the wounds of our ancestors and, eventually, to the maladies of humankind.

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*JEAN GUERRERO is the author of Crux.*



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# How to Write Cross-Culturally with Authenticity

by VANESSA HUA

I'm the daughter of Chinese immigrants, and I've been writing about Asia and the diaspora for two decades. I have a passion for writing about immigrants and their children, about their histories, ambitions, traditions that they bring to this country, and about the complicated relationships they have with their homelands, ancestral and adopted.

I've always strived to shine a light onto untold stories that reflect the world we live in, stories that might inspire a change in thinking, and a change in action. Often, I'm asked about how to tell those stories with truth and authenticity. For me, trying to do so remains a work in progress, but you might find the following guidelines helpful too:

## WRITING ACROSS RACE, GENDER, CLASS, AND ETHNICITY

If you're writing outside of your direct experience, start humbly, not with assumption and arrogance. Ask questions and do research to avoid trite, stereotypical descriptions. Ask yourself, is your character fully realized, or is he or she a symbol?

## WRITING WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

To describe a time, place, or event that you didn't witness firsthand, search through Flickr, YouTube, and Google Street View for photos and videos of other worlds. Read fiction and nonfiction from that country and time period, as well as travel guides. If you discover gaps in the official record,

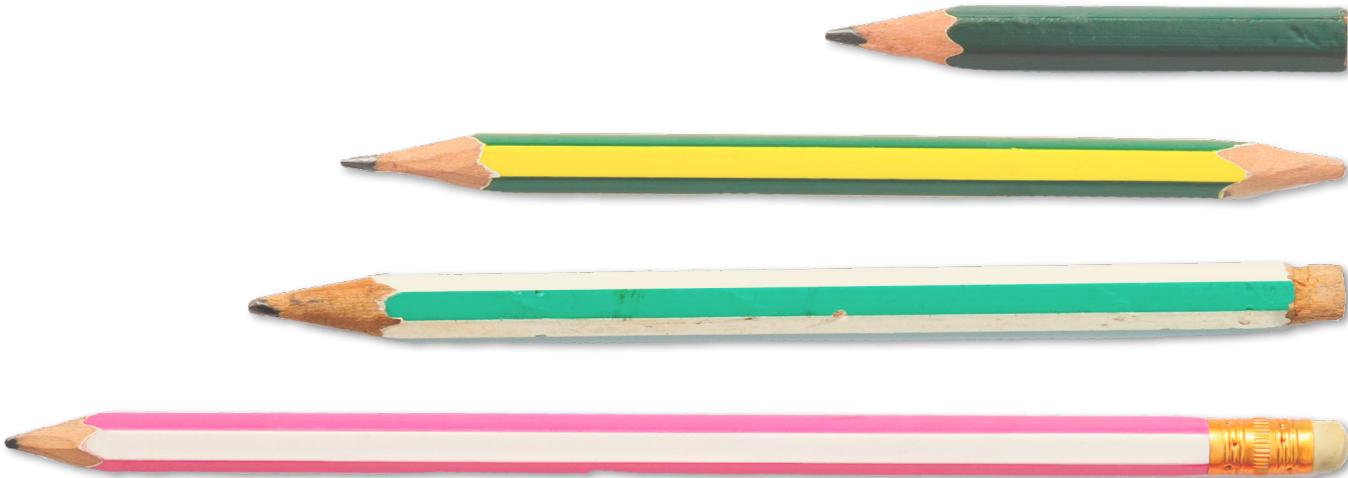
fear not! Your imagination and empathy can fill in the rest.

## BEWARE OF HAGIOGRAPHY

Whether writing about your family or beloved members of a community, don't turn them into saints. As hard-working as your grandfather might have been, as self-sacrificing as your mother is, portray them — or the characters based upon them — in all their flawed complexity.

## INTERVIEWS

Seek out guides who can make introductions for you, such as activists, religious leaders, and reporters from ethnic press. Be aware that they may have an agenda and that you'll have to corroborate their assertions with independent reporting. Entice them with something



that will motivate them to speak to you — “I’d love to get your help shaping my story” or “I’d love to get your insight to inform my reporting” — but do not promise money, favorable coverage, or that you’ll use all their material.

#### **COME PREPARED**

Dig through Factiva, ProQuest, Google News, Lexis-Nexis and other available databases before the interview. Showing you are knowledgeable will demonstrate to your sources that you care.

#### **INTERPRETER**

If you use one, make sure to address your questions to the sources, making eye contact as they talk. Even if you don’t speak the same language, your body language can convey that you are interested and engaged.

#### **ASK OPEN-ENDED**

#### **QUESTIONS**

Avoid questions that result in

a “yes” or “no” response. Ask if they are ok with being recorded. Ask “Do you mind if I record this interview? It’s how I take notes.” Recordings can make sources nervous or self-conscious initially. Ask for anecdotes. A source will say something often happens, or sources say they *usually* do something, but ask for a specific example of when that happened. Have them tell you a story about something in their lives.

#### **PENCILS DOWN, NOTE-BOOKS CLOSED**

But don’t turn off your recorder! As the source relaxes at the end of an interview, sometimes she or he might be at their most revealing. You can always take notes later.

#### **KEEP THE CONNECTION**

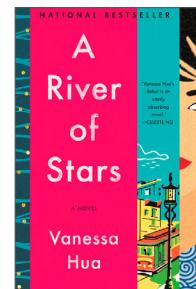
#### **ONGOING**

Your relationship to a source or a community shouldn’t be one-

sided, akin to excavating what you need and never returning again. As a journalist covering different beats, I learned the importance of developing relationships over time. Some stories may be favorable, others less so, but if sources see that you are in for the long haul, they may begin to develop trust and open up to you. So too with fiction inspired by your research into people and their communities.

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VANESSA HUA is the author of *A River of Stars*.



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# **WORKING THROUGH IT**



# A Recipe for Creating the Perfect Storm in a Novel

by KATE CHRISTENSEN

*You will need:*

**A SETTING WITH A CLOSED SOCIAL SYSTEM**  
Think of this as your stovetop burner and pot, both the source of heat and the container for your novel. It could be an army battalion stationed in a war zone, an ethnically or racially segregated neighborhood in a gentrifying city, a group of old college friends with secrets and ancient rivalries in a Fire Island summer house, a boarding school on an island in Maine, a family farm in Pennsylvania... or an old cruise ship on the Pacific Ocean. The best systems are the ones that seem hardy at first, but over the course of the story, as they are exposed to friction, heat, and tension, they soften and break down, revealing themselves to be fragile and corruptible.

## ONE OR MORE PROTAGONISTS

These are your primary ingredients. They should be characters who possess universal qualities, desires, and fears, who struggle to do the right thing and sometimes fail, but nonetheless rise to meet challenges much as we all would, neither heroically nor cynically, but with an instinctive effort to hold on to the things and people they love. In other words — solid, complex, interesting human beings.

## A NUMBER OF MINOR CHARACTERS

These act like spices to make things exciting: They create conflicts and intrigues, add dimension to the story by eliciting, challenging, and complementing our protagonists' fears and desires. They

might include, but are not limited to, fawning opportunists, vindictive ex-spouses, predatory teachers, sociopathic schemers, alcoholic best friends, and autocratic executive chefs.

## AN INCITING INCIDENT

This is the yeast, the leavening, the element that causes the chemical reaction to set the storytelling alchemy in motion. As the energy and reaction it generates propels the story forward, it will also cause the cracks in the social system to show and widen as the story goes on. Examples of inciting incidents: The enemy attacks the barracks, a shady outsider moves in across the street, a teacher is accused of sexually abusing a student, a gas company offers a lot of money to frack on the dairy farm, or the old and creaky ship

sets sail from Long Beach to Hawaii.

### A SERIES OF UPHEAVALS OR CALAMITIES

These actions — comparable to braising, flash-frying, and/or shocking in an ice bath — can gradually build on each other to amp up the drama by intensifying and complicating the characters' collective and individual struggles, ideally in a way that pits them against one another and forces all of them to grapple with their consciences and the limitations of their integrity and courage—such as, in the case of the old and creaky ship: an engine room fire, a crew walkout, a norovirus epidemic, and, finally, a cataclysmic gale-force storm.

### A POINT OF VIEW

This is the heart and soul of your dish, your own personal imprint on the recipe. What do you most deeply believe? What do you think about what's happening to your characters, how do you feel about it? Let your ingredients/characters speak for your own deepest convictions.

### AN ENDING

A dramatic finish is the literary equivalent of setting a Baked Alaska on fire. This should make the reader say "wow!" or "what?" or just exhale because they realize they've been

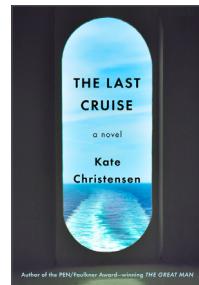
holding their breath for the last ten pages.

#### Directions:

1. One by one, add the protagonists and minor characters into the closed social system in its setting, stirring steadily.
2. Throw in the inciting incident all at once.
3. As the story reacts and bubbles and begins to foment, keep your focus solid and consistency smooth by making sure all the characters' reactions and points of view stay clear and evenly distributed. Stir your narrative lightly but confidently, pushing and pulling with your narrative spoon to give it a proportional, organic shape as it achieves its own swirling momentum.
4. Working quickly but deftly, throw in the first calamity and keep all the characters' reactions front and center.
5. Before the novel can subside back into calm, add your second piece of trouble. Stand back in case of minor explosion, but don't lose your grip on your characters.
6. As things heat up, toss in a third calamity. Then, if you have it and the story can withstand it, a fourth. If the novel threatens to come apart or fall out of its framework, don't lose heart, stick to your *point of view*, and don't be afraid to shake the bowl with it. As Julia Child said, "When you flip anything, you just have to have the courage of your conviction." If it falls on the floor, pick it up and put it back.
7. And now it's time for the surprise finish, like a flambé or a hit of a blowtorch that sears the top. This can and should surprise or shock your reader, but ideally in a way that makes the rest of the novel suddenly appear to be something other than what they thought it was all along. This could cause them to be initially angry or dismayed, but, the more they think about it, the more sense it should make.
8. Serve hot.

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KATE CHRISTENSEN is the author of *The Last Cruise*.



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# THAT DOESN'T MEAN WHAT YOU THINK IT MEANS

FROM THE BOOK BY ROSS PETRAS AND KATHRYN PETRAS  
DRAWINGS BY NATHAN GELGUD

## BEMUSED

IS NOT  
THE SAME  
AS



## AMUSED

THOUGH OFTEN USED INTERCHANGEABLY, "BEMUSED"  
MEANS TO FIND SOMETHING CONFUSING OR PERPLEXING.

## Discreet

MEANS CAPABLE OF KEEPING SECRETS

**DIS** MEANS  
SEPARATE  
OR  
DISTINCT      **CRETE**

SOMETHING **GRISLY**  
CAUSES HORROR OR TERROR,  
SOMETHING **GRIZZLY**  
IS USUALLY A BEAR.

Remember the difference next  
time you read about a  
"Grizzly crime scene."



# RESTIVE

MEANS NERVOUS, FIDGETY, OFTEN  
WHILE PHYSICALLY RESTRAINED.

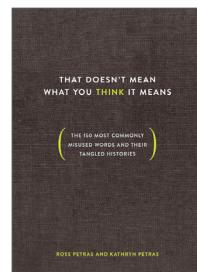
...So think twice before  
you plan a **RESTIVE** day  
at the fishing hole.



SAYING **A TOUGH ROAD TO HOE** DOESN'T REALLY  
MAKE SENSE. WOULDN'T EVERY  
ROAD BE TOUGH TO HOE?

A **ROW**, HOWEVER, LIKE IN A  
CORNFIELD, MAY HAVE VARYING  
DEGREES OF TOUGHNESS.

ROSS & KATHRYN  
PETRAS are the  
authors of *That  
Doesn't Mean What  
You Think It Means*.



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# The Benefits of Isolating Your Character

by LEAH STEWART

In my new book, *What You Don't Know About Charlie Outlaw*, I wrote about a man who travels to an island and ends up in danger. In doing so I joined a long tradition. From *Robinson Crusoe* to *Lord of the Flies* to "Castaway" to "Lost," we keep going back to islands in stories. Like other settings we return to again and again — the wilderness, space, the open ocean — islands can offer adventure or terror. We seem to crave these things in equal measure, in our stories at least.

Islands have other kinds of doubleness as well: escape or abandonment, luxury or deprivation. The flipside of the deserted island — that cartoon place of one palm tree, one coconut, a man in raggedy shorts — is the tropical paradise,

beaches and heat and flowers of astonishing size and brightness, and sometimes resorts and high-end shopping and cocktails bright as the flowers. Civilization at its most pleasurable, or no civilization at all. Islands can

loneliness. All these opposites are inextricably linked. Freedom and exploration can so easily become horror and death. All it takes is a slip of the foot on a cliff's edge, a fin in the water. You feel free precisely because

**We want to know what it would mean to be ourselves without the trappings of our lives.**

be a prison, as in the TV show "Arrow"; a sanctuary, as in "Wonder Woman"; or a place of rebirth, as in "How Stella Got Her Groove Back." When we send characters to islands, we can set them on paths to discovery or despair, a new understanding of love or profound

you're abandoning caution. There is no adventure without danger, no connection without isolation.

We dream of escaping to islands; we fear abandonment on them. Maybe the dream and the nightmare are not so different;

maybe part of us longs to know what it's like to be cast away. We want to know what it would mean to be ourselves without the trappings of our lives: no obligations, no friends or family, no *stuff*. Why do we imagine desert island songs or books, if not because of the desire to strip life to its essentials? What do we care about most? What could we not survive without? What makes survival worthwhile? Also, and perhaps most crucially, could we survive?

Once we're on the island, both dream and nightmare change. Now we long to escape from the island, or, if it's a paradise, fear we'll be forced to leave. We gain a new appreciation of the

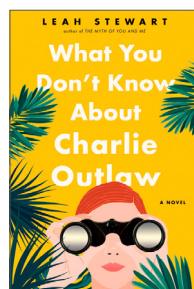
lives we left behind or realize that those lives were wrong for us and we need to start anew. If we've always lived on the island, we long to know what else is out there, across the enormous sea.

The islands I've visited are among the most beautiful places I've ever seen. On Kauai, for instance, the blues of the water and the reds of the hibiscus are so vivid that they made me feel like I was in Oz, everything heightened in sharp contrast to my black-and-white home. But like Oz the place can also be dangerous, with swift and merciless currents, long falls from narrow trails. I've never seen so many posted signs warning of possible death. Islands create all manner of contrasts, demand answers to

life's most insistent questions: Will you stay or go? Survive or die? Who do you become under pressure? Which life do you most want to lead? This is why they're such rich territory for stories — and for dreams.

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LEAH STEWART is the author of *What You Don't Know About Charlie Outlaw*.



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# 5 Grammar Mistakes Even Savvy Writers Make

by JUNE CASAGRANDE

Everyone makes grammar mistakes. But we make them at different levels. Someone with no interest in words or writing might be more prone to confuse “you’re” and “your” or “its” and “it’s.” At the other end of the spectrum, serious wordsmiths are more inclined to commit errors involving “whom” or coordinate subjects like “John and I.” Here are five errors even the most literate people make.

**“Whom” between clauses.** To understand the most common “whom” errors, first compare two sentences that do not contain the pronoun “whom”: “I know him.” “I know he works hard.” Why does the first use an object pronoun, “him,” while the second uses the subject pronoun “he”? Aren’t they both the object of the verb “know,” and if

so, shouldn’t they be in the object form: him? Obviously not. “I know him works hard” is clearly an error. Yet the same error isn’t as clear when we’re dealing with “who” and “whom.” Look at this example: “The manager wanted to hire Yale alumni whom he knew would fit in well at the company.” That’s a mistake. It should be “who.” The object of the verb “knew” is not a single pronoun, “whom.” It’s a whole clause: “who would fit in well.” That verb phrase “would fit in well” needs a subject, so it needs the subject pronoun “who” and not the object pronoun “whom.”

**“Joe and I” used as an object.** We’re taught that “I” is more proper than “me.” That’s often true. “Joe and me are having lunch” is grammatically inferior to “Joe and I are having

lunch.” But sometimes “me” is correct. In “Thanks for taking the time to visit Stephanie and me,” the noun phrase “Stephanie and me” is the object of the verb “visit.” The pronoun “I” is a subject. The pronoun “me” is an object. So for the object of a verb like “visit,” you need “me.” Idiomatically, it’s acceptable to use “I” here. But people who know the rules will think you were trying to be grammatically correct and failed. When in doubt, try omitting the other person. Then you get “Thanks for taking the time to visit I” versus “Thanks for taking the time to visit me.”

**Faulty parallels.** What’s wrong with the following sentence? “Carrie says Brian plans to study biology, math, French, economics and is considering joining



the soccer team.” This sentence contains an error called a faulty parallel, which occurs when listed items fail to attach the same way to a stem. Here the stem is “plans to study.” We’re saying Brian plans to study biology, plans to study math, plans to study French, and so on. To avoid repetition, make all the items in the list share a single “to study.” It works fine until we get to the last item: “is considering joining the soccer team.” Our broken parallel says, “Brian plans to study is considering joining the soccer team.” That’s nonsense. Sometimes, fixing a faulty parallel is as simple as inserting “and” before the last true parallel item. “Brian plans to study biology, math, French, AND economics and is considering joining the soccer team.” Other times, it’s easier to break up the sentence.

**Danglers.** Here’s another “what’s wrong with this sentence?” test for you: “Walking down the beach, my shoulders got sunburned.” Answer: Shoul-

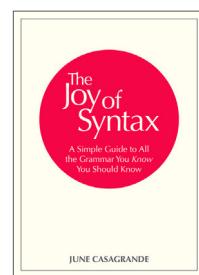
ders can’t walk. This is called a dangler — a modifying phrase that appears to modify the wrong thing. To fix these, put the modifying phrase closest to the thing it modifies. What is “walking down the beach”? A person. So name the person who was walking: “Walking down the beach, I got a sunburn on my shoulders.” When the dangling phrase is an “ing” or “ed” participle like “walking,” it’s called a dangling participle. When it’s a single word or phrase, it’s just a general dangler, as in, “A woman of great accomplishments, the promotion was bestowed on Mary.” Again, just put the recipient of the modification, Mary, as close as you can to the modifying phrase: “A woman of great accomplishments, Mary got the promotion.”

Periods and commas outside quotation marks. In American English, a period or comma always comes before a closing quotation mark: Instead of the word “aggravated,” Chuck likes to use “irritated.” Question marks and

exclamation points have a different rule. They can go either inside or outside depending on whether they modify the whole sentence or just the quoted portion: Alfred E. Neuman’s catchphrase is “What, me worry?” Did you know Bart Simpson’s catchphrase is “Ay, caramba”? You might notice British English or even Wikipedia putting commas or periods outside quote marks. That’s because they have different rules. In American English, the period or comma always comes first.

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JUNE CASAGRANDE is the author of *The Joy of Syntax*.



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