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SOLUTIONS

TO COMMON WRITING MISTAKES

BOB MAYER





WRITER'S DIGEST BOOKS

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SOLUTIONS

TO COMMON WRITING MISTAKES

BY BOB MAYER



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Bob has more than two million books in print, including his latest novel, *Don't Look Down*, co-authored with Jennifer Crusie. He lives on a barrier island off the coast of South Carolina. For more information see www.bobmayer.org or www.crusiemayer.com for the infamous He Wrote/She Wrote blog.

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NOT STARTING

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: If you don't start you can never finish. Completing any writing project, particularly a novel, is a daunting prospect. Many people become frozen by the prospect. Others keep waiting for the right time. Some wait for the spark of inspiration. Even experienced writers find it is easier to do anything other than actually write.

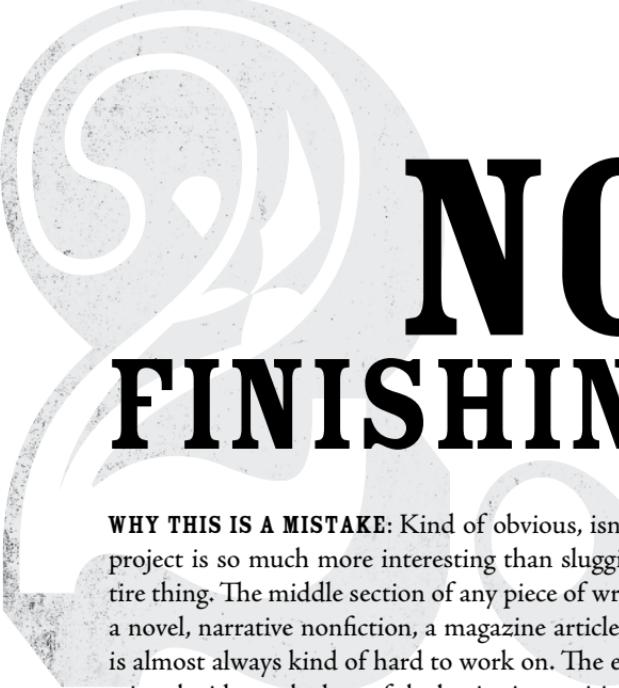
Many people say, "I've always wanted to write a novel/how-to book/nonfiction narrative/a magazine article." They're called wannabes. Don't be a wannabe.

THE SOLUTION: Start anywhere. While the opening line, page, and chapter of a book is critical, remember you can always change the opening upon rewriting. So after doing the correct preparations (covered further on), pick the best possible start point at the moment and just begin writing. The right time is now. This minute. The right time can be while sitting in the airport waiting for your flight, which is where I'm writing this.

**YOU PROVIDE NOT ONLY THE
SPARK OF INSPIRATION,
BUT ALSO THE FUEL TO SUSTAIN IT.
YOU CANNOT LOOK OUTWARD
FOR THESE THINGS. NO ONE ELSE IS
GOING TO MAKE YOU WRITE.**

If you study successful writers, you will find that many began writing at what appeared to be inopportune times—not when all the stars were lined up and things were perfect. Often they began writing when the timing seemed the absolute worst. This might actually be the best time to write. If you wait for the perfect time, it will never come.

So. You've just started reading a book about writing mistakes. If you have always wanted to write but have never written what you want to, you've made the first mistake and it's easily correctable. Open a blank Word document; grab a blank piece of paper and pencil (we're not that perfect); open a vein and start bleeding onto the page.



NOT FINISHING

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: Kind of obvious, isn't it? But starting a project is so much more interesting than slugging through the entire thing. The middle section of any piece of writing, whether it be a novel, narrative nonfiction, a magazine article, even a short story, is almost always kind of hard to work on. The excitement of generating the idea—the lure of the beginning, writing something new—isn't there, and the lure of the finishing line is as far away as the shiver of the beginning.

It's always easy to get sidetracked by a new idea while you're in the midst of working on something. It's also easy for a writer to do just about anything other than write. Check e-mail, go out and walk the dog, do laundry, take a nap, research, market—anything. I've always said the hardest aspect of the job of being a writer is writing.

The Myers-Briggs personality test classifies people as either process oriented or result oriented. If you are a process person, you might have a problem getting to the end of a project.

THE SOLUTION: Suck it up. Keep those new ideas and exciting other projects at bay. For the professional writer who is under contract this is a bit easier because you know your paycheck hangs in the balance, but even then, I know many authors who have a hell of a time bringing a project in on deadline.

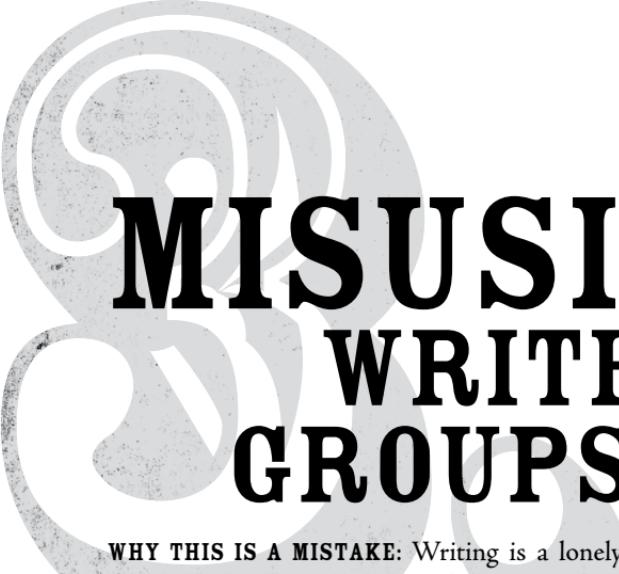
For the writer who isn't under contract this isn't quite the case. But understand you won't ever get that contract if you don't finish a project.

If you are one of those people focused on the process and not the end result, figure out a system whereby you can reward yourself by getting to the end.

**MAKE THE END, MAKE FINISHING,
PART OF THE PROCESS.**

**WHAT I MEAN BY THIS IS THAT YOU DO NOT
ALLOW YOURSELF TO MOVE ON
TO ANOTHER PROJECT, ANOTHER
PROCESS, UNTIL YOU FINISH WHATEVER
PROJECT YOU ARE CURRENTLY
WORKING ON.**

The bottom line is simply forcing yourself to sit down and plug away at it. Knocking out words regardless of how you feel. A one-hundred-thousand-word novel might take a year or several years, and then you just come to "The End" one day. But it takes hundreds of days to get to "The End." As a writer you have to put in those hundreds of days.



MISUSING WRITER'S GROUPS

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: Writing is a lonely profession. Many writers flock to writer's groups that meet in person every so often—or more so these days, online writer's groups. Elsewhere I'm going to talk about the importance of networking, and writer's groups can be useful in that regard, but they can also be a negative influence if used improperly. In fact, if there are no professional writers in the group, a writer's group can be a case of the blind leading the blind. Sometimes (often in some bad groups), if egos are not controlled, the best writers are often torn down (either consciously, or more often, subconsciously) because they are a threat to the majority of the other writers in the room. Also, people can waste valuable time getting critiqued and critiquing rather than writing. For novel writers, a group can be troublesome in that a novel is a very large and time-consuming project, and a group can have a hard time keeping track of such a large endeavor.

THE SOLUTION: Be very particular with any group you decide to join. It is very helpful if the group has at least one or two published and professional writers in it to give some guidance and to keep it on track. A group must have rules to help its members avoid descent into unbridled hacking and slashing. One rule to follow is that you cannot critique content, only style. What this means is that whatever subject someone wants to write about is her business and not open for judgment by the group. Another rule is to balance negative and positive comments. Another rule is to be specific about comments, to not offer “I just don’t like it.”

**BALANCE THE AMOUNT OF TIME YOU SPEND
WITH A WRITER'S GROUP AGAINST THE
AMOUNT OF TIME YOU SPEND WRITING, WITH
THE MAJORITY TOWARD THE LATTER.**

Also consider a small, tight group rather than a large group. Make sure the group you are in is oriented toward your type of writing and not scattered. When you go to writer's conferences, consider the people you meet there as possible writing partners, or as people with whom you might form a small writing community, whether local or online.

If you are a member of a writer's group, stop every so often and evaluate the effectiveness of the group with regard to your writing, both in terms of creativity and business-wise. While the group might emotionally fulfill some need you have, is it fulfilling its true purpose?

(For tips on starting your own writer's group, see Appendix F of *The Mini Market Book*.)



FORGETTING THE READER

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: The ultimate consumer of any form of writing is the reader. Yet too often writers focus on people other than the reader. The biggest mistake a writer can make is focusing on herself. There's no point in writing something down for someone else to read if the only person you care about is yourself. Too often, writers end up telling their own story, thinly disguised as fiction. This is called the fictional memoir. Readers have their own lives—lives that are of much more interest to them than someone else's, unless that other person's story is told in an exceptional manner or is of an extraordinary nature. Sad to say, most people's lives are not as interesting as they think they are.

THE SOLUTION: A writer's job is to get something that is inside her own head into the reader's head through the sole medium of the printed word. Thus the writer must focus on the words and the affect those words are going to have on the reader's thoughts and emotions, particularly the latter.

**NO MATTER WHAT TYPE OF
WRITING YOU ARE DOING, YOU HAVE TO
REMEMBER HOW THAT
WRITING IS RECEIVED BY THE READER.**

If you are a technical writer, consider how your information is being processed by the reader's brain. If you are writing an instruction manual, have several people read what you've written as they try to follow your instructions, and see if they can accomplish the task.

When writing fiction, pretend you are the reader and that you know nothing about the story other than what you've read from the first word of the first sentence. Are you hooked? Is there escalating conflict? Suspense? Are you engaged with the characters of the story? Do you want to know what happens next? Of course, you the author, care about what you're writing. The key is making the reader care.

5 THINKING YOU'RE THE EXCEPTION TO THE RULE

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: This is where things start to get sticky. Too many beginning writers want to be artists before they learn the craft of writing. They think they can do whatever they want because, after all, it's "just writing." They go to the bookstore and see books published in which, for example, the author uses no punctuation. So, they believe, there are no rules.

Actually, there are rules. There are rules as far as grammar and punctuation. There are also rules to craft. There are rules to the business. And writers, especially those trying to break in, best not believe they are the exception to the rules (even though, as you will see shortly, there are indeed exceptions to every rule).

There is a tendency for people to think most artists are overnight successes. While there are some, they are the exception to the rule. But you aren't. Not yet.

THE SOLUTION: Learn the rules. Accept that, initially, you're not going to be in a position to do much rule breaking. Accept that there are reasons there are rules. Accept that those people who do strange and bizarre things to draw attention to themselves, draw attention to themselves that they really don't want to have.

Also accept that you don't know the full story behind the successes of those people who broke the rules. There is an inside story to everything, and when you get further into the business of writing, sometimes you learn that the rule-breakers were successful for reasons other than the apparent ones.

**WHATEVER TYPE OF WRITING
YOU WANT TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN, ACCEPT
THAT YOU NEED TO WORK YOUR
WAY UP IN THE CRAFT BY LEARNING THE
BASICS, THE RULES. WRITING
IS LIKE ANY OTHER PROFESSION
IN THIS WAY.**



NOT BREAKING RULES

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: It is a mistake to break a rule, and it's not a mistake. You're not the exception to the rule until you know the rule and have a reason to break the rule. Thus my three steps of rule breaking, which I'll list in the solution. But first, why would you want to break a rule? Because, if you're like everyone else, you'll never stand out. If you've been trying to get published, in any format, sooner or later you're going to run into the classic rejection of: "We want something like X, but not X."

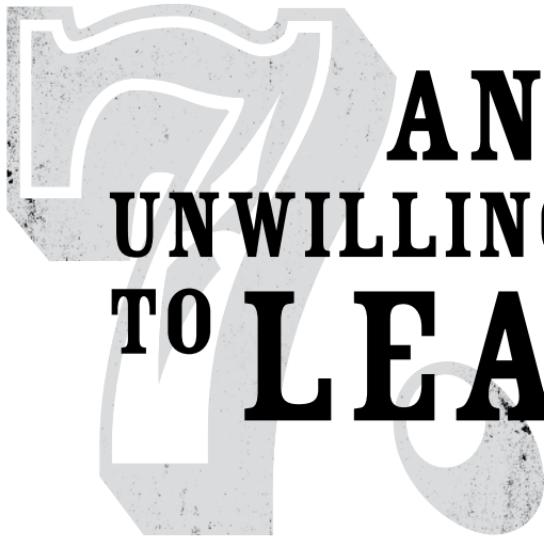
**TRY TO MAKE SOMETHING NEW FROM
PROVEN STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES.
PUT YOUR OWN UNIQUE SPIN AND STAMP
ON THINGS THAT HAVE WORKED.**

THE SOLUTION: There are three steps to rule breaking. The first is learn the rules. If you break a rule because you don't know it's a rule, that's simply called, putting it nicely, not being very smart. It means you haven't bothered to do the basic homework of learning the craft.

The second step is to have a very good reason for breaking the rule. Don't just break the rule because you have nothing better to do. Look at the rules, study them. Then figure out why you would want to do things differently.

Third, and most important, accept the consequences of breaking the rule. If it works, great. But most likely, it won't work. Then you have to pick up the pieces and start over again.

You have to eventually break rules to stand out from the crowd and be successful in the world of publishing. You have to be unique. If you examine the three steps, they are a career arc: learning the rules, which is learning the craft. Having a reason to break the rule, which is making a decision as an artist. Accepting responsibility, which is making a career decision.



AN UNWILLINGNESS TO LEARN

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: I've taught thousands of writers over the years. Online; through correspondence courses; at workshops, conferences, and retreats. I would have to say 95 percent of the participants really didn't improve their writing very much. A good percentage of those, I believe, signed up for the instruction looking for validation, not to learn. When they didn't get that validation, they shut their minds down. The rest thought they were there to fine-tune their writing, not get the major overhaul they really needed. For many others it was a case of not letting go of their preconceived notions about their writing. They just were not open to learning. More importantly, their minds were closed off to information and concepts that did not align with their own. But here's the key: If you're not where you want to be, you have to change. Change requires being open-minded.

THE SOLUTION: Every year, I learn many new things about writing. My opinions and view of various aspects of the craft undergo tremendous changes as I listen to other writers, study the craft, and try new things. I believe open-mindedness to be one of the most critical character traits a writer must have in order to become better and successful. One of the keys to open-mindedness is focusing on things that you really object to or that make you angry when you see or hear them. We build our greatest defenses around our greatest weaknesses in all aspects of our lives, and that includes writing. So when something that you hear in a workshop or conference really bothers you, put aside your negative emotions and really focus on it with an open mind to see if perhaps you've just heard something very important that will make you a better writer.

**NEVER THINK YOU HAVE IT MADE.
ALWAYS BE OPEN TO NEW INFORMATION
AND NEW WAYS OF DOING THINGS.**

If you do get published, become a teacher of writing—not only because you owe it to others to pass it on, but also because you will learn a lot by explaining what you think you know to other people.

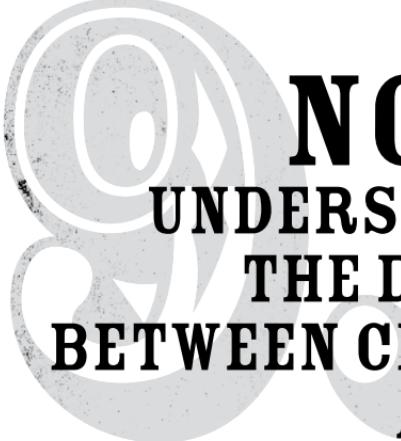


LETTING YOUR EGO RUN AMOK

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: Too many people want what they envision being a writer is, as opposed to what being a writer really is. They envision the book racked in the store, the book signing, being at a party and saying "I'm an author." The reality is that 99 percent of an author's life consists of writing. Sitting alone with pad and paper or in front of a computer and creating something out of nothing. There is very little ego-stroking involved in being a writer, since the majority of a writer's life involves working alone.

THE SOLUTION: Being a writer is about the writing, not the end result of writing. Pretty much every published author I know dreads events such as book tours and agent/editor meetings. Focus on the process of being a writer, not the trappings of being a writer. The reality is not all it appears to be. Do not try to take shortcuts to getting published or to misrepresent yourself or to cheat. One thing to remember about getting published in any format: The printed word is out there for anyone to see and double-check, so any shortcuts taken will come back to haunt you.

Being a writer is about creating, through words, a construct that comes alive in readers' minds. Yet the reader is always separate from the writer. Therefore, the writer has to be satisfied with sitting alone 99 percent of the time with just the creating.



NOT UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CRAFTSMAN AND ARTIST

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: Too many beginning writers try to be artists before they master the craft of writing. While in every generation there are some natural-born geniuses who can make that leap, the vast majority of us have to toil away at learning the craft.

There are very few professions in which someone would expect to walk in and be accepted at the highest levels right from the start. Yet, for some reason, people think writing is a profession in which amateurs can enter right at the top levels.

THE SOLUTION: Learn the craft of writing. First and foremost, learn it by writing a lot. There is no substitute for actually doing something in order to learn it. Then get feedback from those who know more about the craft than you do, either through a network of friends, a writer's group, a writing retreat, a writing conference, a mentor, whatever you can find. An MFA (master of fine arts) in creative writing is another possibility, although usually the focus in those programs is more on literary writing.

10 WAITING FOR THE MOOD TO STRIKE

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: While writing is an emotional art form, it is also a business. Too many people, when they are first starting out, think it's all about working when the mood is right. They might be waiting a very long time. Most writers I've talked to say that what they write when the mood is right is pretty much the same as what they write when the mood isn't. While a large part of a writer's work consists of thinking, a writer isn't paid for those thoughts. A writer is paid for the words that are written.

THE SOLUTION: Write. That sounds simple, but writers will go to amazing lengths to do anything other than the one thing the job title requires them to do. One of the greatest curses for writers is the Internet. When I taught martial arts, my students' moods were of no concern to me, and I think it's the same way with writing. If you force yourself to write, regardless of what you feel, you will begin to see that what you create is of the same quality, no matter your mood. Also, you'll find that as you make it a habit to write more and more, those other habits that kept you from writing will go away and you will become more efficient.

**WHILE WRITING IS AN EMOTIONAL
BUSINESS, IT IS STILL A BUSINESS, AND YOU
HAVE TO TREAT IT AS SUCH.
JUST AS PEOPLE IN PRETTY MUCH EVERY
OTHER BUSINESS HAVE TO GET
UP AND GO TO WORK REGARDLESS OF WHAT
THEY FEEL LIKE WHEN THE SCHEDULE
CALLS FOR IT, SO DOES A WRITER.**

Sometimes you just have to grind it out. Also, there are other aspects of the business of writing besides writing that you can do if the muse has truly deserted you. There is research to be done, marketing, making sure your business records are in order, teaching, conferences, notes to be put in order, presentations to be updated, outlines to be prepared for future books, previous books to be edited, etc.

11 NOT MANAGING YOUR TIME CORRECTLY

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: Time is the most valuable asset you have. One of the biggest excuses people make for not writing is that they don't have enough time. Yet most people never examine the way they really use their time.

While time is the greatest and most valuable asset we all have, it is also the thing we waste with the greatest disregard. It's easy to say "Live each day as if it were your last," but that's actually not good advice for a writer who knows she needs a year to write a novel. She'd stop writing and go out and run in the sand at the local beach. What a writer needs to do is prioritize her writing over distractions. A writer needs to make a decision about where writing fits in the big picture of her life, and then act upon that priority. You can't just say you want to be a writer; you have to live like you are a writer.

THE SOLUTION: If you want to be a writer, you have to make writing important enough that you take time away from activities that aren't as important. Sit down and write out your daily routine. Look at where you can stop doing something, such as watching TV, and make that prime writing time. Many successful authors made their time at one end or the other of their day. They got up an hour earlier or went to bed an hour later and used that slice of time to write. Some people write on the train during their commute to and from work. Some people use their lunch hour.

**THE BOTTOM LINE IS THAT IF YOU
WANT TO BE A WRITER BAD ENOUGH,
YOU WILL MAKE THE TIME.**

19 FAILING TO LEARN FROM THE MASTERS

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: I suppose there are some people who come out of the womb as natural-born writers (but if you really study the truly gifted writers, you will learn that even they spent great amounts of time and energy on learning their craft and art). Then there are the rest of us. We have to learn the craft. While there are many ways to learn the craft, one of the best is often the most overlooked by aspiring writers: learning from those who have mastered it already.

THE SOLUTION: Have you ever gone into a museum and noticed all those art students seated in front of the classic paintings, sketching them? Writers should be no different. Study the works of bet-

ter writers. Break their work down and examine the structure. Ask yourself why the author did everything she did. I once picked a week and read the fifteen books that were currently on the *New York Times* best-seller list, regardless of genre and whether I liked them or not, simply to learn. And I learned a lot. If something is successful, study it, regardless of how you feel about it. That doesn't mean you have to do what that person is doing, but it does mean you have to understand what that person is doing.

Note that I read current books. While studying the canon of literature is good, classics from the past might not be so applicable to the twenty-first-century world of publishing.

Do this not only with writing, but with any type of art that comes close to your own. As a novel writer, I study movies, their similarities to novels, and their differences from novels. If I were a newspaper reporter, I think it would behoove me to study film journalism.

STUDY NOT ONLY THE CRAFT, BUT THE ARTISTS THEMSELVES.

Read biographies of their lives in order to understand how they approached their art and also how their careers progressed. Also study how they approached the business.

NOT HAVING AN IDEA THAT'S DIFFERENT ENOUGH

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: There is an inherent catch-22 in writing: You have to learn the craft of writing, yet if you follow the rules of the craft too closely, you become like everyone else who can read an instruction manual. Every idea, pretty much every story, has been done before. Elsewhere I mention the value of studying those who have mastered the craft of writing. That's all well and good, but sooner or later, you're going to have to put your own stamp on your writing.

In the same manner, too many writers are concerned about what's hot now and what's selling now. The problem with this line of thinking is twofold. What's hot now is a ship that has already sailed—anything you sell now will have to be hot a year from now. And what will be selling a year from now is anybody's guess. Usually, it's good writing.

THE SOLUTION: Look inside yourself and find your own passion and creativity. Apply that passion and creativity to learning the craft and then putting your own spin on things. There is no one else out there who is you. This is how you become different enough. By being you. No one else has lived your life and has had your experiences and possesses your brain.

**PUT YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES
INTO YOUR WRITING, EVEN IF JUST IN
THE FORM OF A UNIQUE
POINT OF VIEW, AND YOU'LL MAKE YOUR
WRITING STAND OUT FROM
EVERYONE ELSE'S.**

NOT DOING ENOUGH WORK PRIOR TO STARTING YOUR ACTUAL WRITING

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: Too often writers jump into their project before doing the necessary groundwork, and they end up with a mess. Revising can only do so much. Sometimes starting writing too quickly can leave you with a project that can't be saved and waste a lot of your time and energy. It's easier to pick the best point of view for your story *before* writing. It's easier to figure out your characters' backstories and primary motivators *before* writing. It's easier to develop and understand the antagonist's plan *before* writing. Get the picture?

Many of the mistakes listed here can be avoided prior to starting your writing.

THE SOLUTION: Think through what you're going to do before you do it. For every action you plan to take, ask yourself why, and make sure you have a good reason. Numerous writing books offer checklists for things like characters, but you actually almost need a checklist for the entire writing project, covering all aspects of it, making sure you know what you plan to do and why you plan to do it.

**LOOK AT ALL ASPECTS OF THE
CRAFT OF WRITING AND MAKE CONSCIOUS
DECISIONS ON AS MUCH AS
POSSIBLE BEFORE YOU WRITE THE FIRST
PAGE OF YOUR MANUSCRIPT.
THIS WILL SAVE A GREAT AMOUNT OF
WORK LATER ON.**

Ultimately (and many new writers cringe to hear this) the best preparation for whatever form of writing you do—whether novel, short story, or article—is to create a practice form of that writing, toss it in a drawer, and then move on to another. For a novel writer, this is a particularly hard thing to hear.

1 NOT BEING ABLE TO SUCCINCTLY SAY WHAT YOUR WORK IS ABOUT

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: In my experience, people who cannot effectively summarize their work usually have a project that has no focus. Have you ever started a novel and gotten lost halfway through? Have you ever written a full-length feature article only to realize at the end that a tangential side note took over your piece around

word 562? If so, then you probably didn't have a firm grasp on your starting point and a clear concept of how to get to your intended ending. Big mistake.

THE SOLUTION: When you begin a new writing project, sit down and write out the original creative idea from which that project originated. Print it out and tape it somewhere in your office where you can see it every time you work on the project. It will keep you on track. A novel, for example, is a very long, slow journey full of many surprising twists and turns. Along that journey it is very easy to get lost. To have a subplot overwhelm your main plot. To have your protagonist react in a manner that distracts from the story line. To have your research overwhelm your topic of choice.

**HAVING THAT ORIGINAL IDEA
IN BLACK AND WHITE, RIGHT WHERE
YOU CAN SEE IT, WILL KEEP YOU
ON THE RIGHT PATH.**



16 NOT KNOWING WHAT YOUR THEME/ INTENT IS

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: Theme or intent is the emotion you want readers to feel when they are finished with whatever you have written. No matter how objective you are, even if you are writing a newspaper article, your emotions are going to come through in your writing. If you are not aware of this, then they come through subconsciously and you can end up evoking in your reader a theme you didn't intend.

Often, the theme in the works of a new writer comes out of the blind spot of his character, which means it's often a negative theme, which might not be what he really wants to convey.

THE SOLUTION: Theme comes out most clearly in the resolution of the novel, which is the last scene. So if you don't know what the theme is before you write the book, at the very least, check it out after you've finished the first draft. But, of course ...

**IT'S BEST TO KNOW YOUR THEME BEFORE
YOU START YOUR WRITING
PROJECT, WHATEVER IT MIGHT BE, SO
THAT THE WHOLE OF YOUR
WRITING SUPPORTS THAT INTENTION.**

If you don't have a handle on your theme before starting, you can end up contradicting yourself in your own writing and confusing your readers. Also, while you don't have to have a positive theme, ask yourself whether people prefer feeling positive or negative.

1 NOT KNOWING WHO YOUR AUDIENCE IS

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: Too often writers disconnect from the people on the other side of the writing (the readers); there's a breakdown in effective communication.

**ACQUIRING EDITORS ARE
EXTREMELY IN TUNE WITH WHO THEIR
TARGET AUDIENCE IS, SO IT
BEHOOVES YOU, AS THE WOULD-BE WRITER,
TO KEEP THIS IN MIND.**

Every type of written material is geared toward a certain type of reader. A technical writer has to know who the consumer of the manual would be. A writer for a magazine has to know what demographic that magazine targets. Genre fiction writers should know what type of readers gravitate toward that genre.

THE SOLUTION: Study the end-product of your target publication, or the best-sellers of your chosen genre. If you want to write for magazines, study those magazines, their advertisers, and their core demographics. As a novelist, I go to bookstores and simply sit there and watch people who wander the stacks. Try it sometime. Watch how people select books. What stops them? What catches their eye? Is it the cover designs? Titles? The back cover copy that succinctly tells them what the story is about? Go online and watch chat groups of readers. See how they discuss books and how they feel about what they read. Always, always think about your audience, what they are reading and what they want to read.



PLAYING OUT YOUR PERSONAL DEMONS ON THE PAGE

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: Many psychologists and counselors advise their patients to keep a journal. To record their day-to-day activities and the way they feel about what happens. To delve into their life and their past and record events and their feelings about those events.

Unfortunately, too many people consider this to be a novel. They write a story about themselves and then think the rest of the world will

be fascinated. The problem with this is that everyone has his own story. Why would he want to read about someone else's story?

The other problem with writing your story is that you are fictionalizing fact. You are in essence writing what I call the fictional memoir. If your memoir is so important, then write it as memoir. If it needs to be fictionalized, then it probably isn't that important to start with.

Another problems with fictionalizing your memoir is that when you get editorial feedback you will resist changing anything, using the infamous comment of "but that's not what happened." And the editor will say: "But it's a novel, so you can change anything you want." And you will reply: "But that's not what happened." And around and around it will go.

THE SOLUTION: If you have to do the personal demon novel, write it fast, get it out of your system, and unless it superlatively written, throw it in a drawer and move on and write a book that is outward oriented.

Once more, this is a case of thinking about the reader and not the writer. Your goal as the author is to entertain and inform the reader, not to burden the reader with the trials and tribulations of your life. Frankly—and this is one of the things that agents and editors have to bite their tongues to keep from saying during their one-on-one sessions during conferences—most people's life stories are not interesting enough to fill out a novel.

19 NOT HAVING A HOOK

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: If you don't hook the reader, she will stop reading, which means your career as a writer will be a short one. It doesn't matter what kind of writing you do. A newspaper reporter has to hook a reader within a few words. A novelist within a few pages. It does appear that people's attention spans are getting shorter, so hooking your reader early is becoming even more important. Whatever field of writing you are in, you are competing with a lot of other media for the reader's attention.

THE SOLUTION: A hook is emotional, as well as intellectual. *The Da Vinci Code* had a great intellectual hook in its opening chapter: a puzzle that drew readers in. You need something in your opening that will grab the reader.

Go to a bookstore and walk to the new fiction section. Pick up the hardcovers and read the opening pages. See how many of those hook you with just the first page. Examine why those pages hook you. Examine which ones don't hook you and ask why not. Is it the setting? The characters? The writing? See how the opening scene in each book ends. How does the author draw you in and keep you drawn into the book?

If you want to write an article or essay, look through magazines and literary journals and read pieces similar to the one you're working on. Study each piece and think about what draws you, as well as what turns you off.

TELLING, NOT SHOWING



WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: This is the classic writing instructor's line: "Show, don't tell." Telling is easy. It's appropriate if you are a newspaper reporter or a technical writer, or if you are writing an instruction manual. If your job is simply to tell the facts, then tell. But telling is rarely entertaining, and most forms of creative writing are designed to be entertaining.

THE SOLUTION: Think of the maxim "Actions speak louder than words." The same is true when you write. Don't rely on exposition to convey the crucial parts of your story. Instead, use action to illustrate dramatic moments and infuse your scenes with tension and emotion.



OVERUSING SETUP

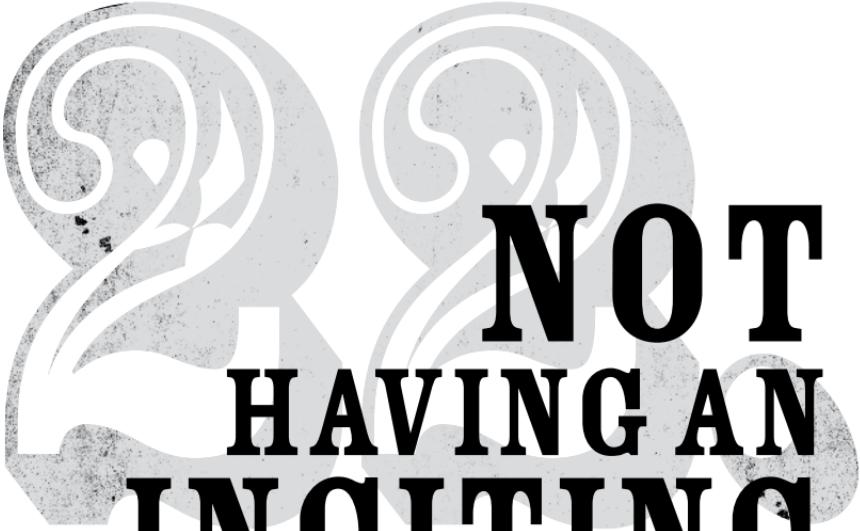
WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: Setup is not story. History is not story. Too many novice writers feel like they need to setup *everything* before they start the story. If you do this, the reader will quickly become bored and never get to the story. The reader wants action and conflict, not pages of tedious backstory.

This is true not only of a book, but of a scene. Every time you show your character waking up, driving some place, going somewhere, doing anything that in no way contributes any tension, ask yourself if it is necessary or if it can be cut.

THE SOLUTION: There is a maxim in screenwriting: Start as far into the action as possible. You can always layer in backstory later, when the reader really needs to know the information in order to understand what is going on.

Look at what Frank Herbert does in his classic book, *Dune*. He invents an entire new universe for his book, but he doesn't start out the book by explaining this universe to the reader. Instead, he starts out small, hooks the reader with the protagonist, conflict, and action, and then explains the pieces of his universe only when the reader absolutely needs the information in order to understand what comes next in the story. For example, Herbert has space travel in his story. However, he does not explain space travel to the reader until the moment when his protagonist gets on board a spaceship. That is the appropriate time to explain it.

**ONLY GIVE THE READER
INFORMATION WHEN SHE ABSOLUTELY
NEEDS IT TO UNDERSTAND
CHARACTER AND STORY—AND NOT BEFORE.**



NOT HAVING AN INCITING INCIDENT

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: The inciting incident is the event that upsets the protagonist's everyday world. The resulting story, then, is an attempt to restore the natural order. At the end of the book, the old order will be brought back, or a new order will be established.

Novice writers often fail to create an inciting incident to get their story moving. Too often, their characters just wake up one day and decide to change their lives or do things differently on a whim. This will strike astute readers as false and unrealistic. Why?

**BECAUSE HUMAN BEINGS RARELY SEEK OUT
CHANGE FOR THE SAKE
OF CHANGE, AND READERS KNOW THIS.
READERS WANT TO
KNOW THE WHY BEHIND THE CHANGE.**

THE SOLUTION: Readers need to clearly see the event that starts the action of the story. However, this pivotal event does not necessarily need to be the first event of the book. Keep in mind that it's even possible for inciting events to occur long before the start of the book. In J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy, for instance, the Ring was around for a very long time—well before Frodo Baggins was even born. In fact, the inciting incident for the trilogy actually occurs when Bilbo finds the ring in *The Hobbit*.

The thing is, though, you have to have a clear handle on what this event is *before you start writing*. If you don't really know what event kicks off your story and causes your protagonist's life to turn upside down, then how are readers supposed to figure it out?



NOT ESCALATING THE CONFLICT

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: Not only must every scene in a story have conflict, but the level of conflict must continue to escalate throughout the course of the story. Too often, writers open with a great hook to a story that only goes downhill. To keep the reader engaged, the stakes for the protagonist and antagonist must rise, leading up to the final conflict in the climactic scene.

Writers often get lost in backstory, flashbacks and memories, and dialogue, leading to an overall loss of conflict—and reader interest—as they get further into the story.

THE SOLUTION: Make things grow more difficult for both the protagonist and the antagonist. Many writers forget to up the stakes for the antagonist by focusing too much on the protagonist. The protagonist and antagonist are locked in conflict, and the stakes must grow more important to both of them as the story progresses. Ask yourself what happens if each of them loses. What if your protagonist fails? What if your antagonist fails? As the book goes on, they both become more invested in what they are doing, so that failure becomes more and more unacceptable.

**A BONUS: ESCALATING
CONFLICT ALSO CAUSES READERS TO
BECOME MORE AND MORE
EMOTIONALLY INVESTED IN YOUR
CHARACTERS.**

Another way to escalate conflict is to make what seems like a good thing turn out to be a bad thing and vice versa. This is much like real life. We've all had this happen to us. You win the lottery. Good thing, right? So you buy a sports car. Then you crash it and end up in a hospital. Bad thing, right? But then you meet this doctor. Marry him/her. Good thing, right? But then he/she is a serial killer. Bad thing, right? And so on.

MISUSING FLASHBACKS AND MEMORIES

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: Flashbacks and memories are not wrong in and of themselves, but they are often used wrongly. Time, for most of us, is linear and moves forward. In the same manner, time in a story or article is linear and moves forward—because that's what people naturally understand and expect. When you use a flashback or a memory, then, you are going against the natural flow of things.

(Many writers don't understand the difference between a flashback and a memory. If you've ever been divorced, you will understand the difference. A flashback is a portrayal of what actually happened. A memory is what someone remembers happening. A memory is tainted by everything that happened after the event and by a person's emotions.)

Many writers fail to make it very clear to the reader when they have entered a flashback or a memory. I once read a manuscript in which the

author had put the story into a flashback inside of a memory, inside of another memory, inside of flashback. That's not good.

THE SOLUTION: Make sure you have a very good reason for using flashbacks or memories—they must be essential to understanding the present story.

Also make sure you know whether you need a flashback or a memory, as each will be written differently and interpreted by the reader differently. A flashback requires a verb-tense transition, whereas a memory requires an action transition. Using clear transitions will ensure that readers know when they are entering and leaving a flashback or memory.

**REMEMBER: THE READER USUALLY
WANTS TO KNOW WHAT'S
GOING TO HAPPEN NEXT, NOT WHAT
ALREADY HAPPENED.**



25 OVERPLAYING EMOTIONS

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: Have you ever been forced to watch awkward public displays of affection when you wished you were somewhere else or just wanted to tell someone to go get a motel room?

Novice writers tend toward hyperbole in order to make sure the reader gets it, and this can lead to the creation of characters who always overreact. Characters whose emotions go with the wind are constantly reacting to a given scene. They might enter the scene smiling and in a good mood. Then something happens and they become angry. Then they hear something and laugh. Then they see something and become sad. Then someone says something that triggers a childhood memory and they cry. Then someone walks by and they're in love, and all of this occurs in four pages. This, needless to say, is very unrealistic; the reader knows this isn't a real character with real feelings.

THE SOLUTION: In real life most people—unless they are very dramatic—are pretty stable and have a basic emotion that isn't easily swayed or changed by external events.

**A FICTIONAL CHARACTER
CAN UNDERGO AN EMOTIONAL CHANGE IN
ONE SCENE, BUT IT HAS TO
BE A NATURAL EMOTIONAL SHIFT FROM A
TO B, NOT FROM A TO D, TO C,
TO X, TO B.**

Give your character a basic core emotion for each scene. Then, if her emotions are going to change, use a specific action to facilitate that change, and make it clear to the reader why they, too, would change their emotion in response to that action.

Try to visualize the characters as real people, with their scenes playing out right in front of you. How would you feel if you saw this happening? Would you be calling for the men in the white coats to take your characters away?



SAYING THE SAME THING OVER AND OVER

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: The reader gets it the first time, yet many new writers don't understand this. A fact, a character's emotion, a key clue, or an element of foreshadowing—new authors are tempted to pound the information home again and again to make sure the reader gets it. But the key word there is *pound*. Readers don't like to be pounded. The first time someone reads something, she gets it. The second time, she'll figure it's really important. The third time, she'll start to get irritated.

THE SOLUTION: Trust your readers. They understand that everything they read has significance. Remember, too, that if you overemphasize something, you're downplaying other aspects of your book. Everything in a book, every little detail, must serve some purpose (hopefully several purposes).

Beating the reader to death with repetition can give away the important clue in your murder mystery, or your antagonist's plan in your thriller, or other key plot points. If you don't beat these key plot points to death, the reader won't be able to discern which of all the plot points are the key ones, and which are the red herrings.



LECTURING THE READER

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: No one likes to be lectured. Not even in school, where they pay to be lectured. Think back to your favorite teachers. Did they tell or show? Readers buy fiction to be entertained. They buy others forms of writing to be informed, but they usually want that information to come in a format that is palatable and easily digestible or, even better, entertaining. Too often writers see fiction as a vehicle for disseminating their views on some subject, and they plainly lecture the reader on those views.

THE SOLUTION: Entertain the reader. Layer any themes and intent inside of an entertaining story. Show, don't tell, and let the reader interpret what he wants from that showing. The best writing keeps the reader thinking long after she is done with the story. This type of writing works on several levels: It works on a base level of pure entertainment. And then it works on a more contemplative level, causing the reader to think things through and consider the characters' actions and choices.



WRITING INCIDENTS, NOT SCENES

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: Too often, novice writers feel like they are losing the reader if they aren't constantly barraging the reader with new scenes; the scenes become so short that they are no longer scenes, but incidents.

There are several problems with this. Barraging the reader with short scenes/incidents disrupts the narrative flow of the story. The reader feels overwhelmed by a storm of short incidents. You can't keep a story constantly ramped up—a reader needs to decompress every now and then.

THE SOLUTION: Slow down. Storytelling is the oldest profession. Once you hook the reader, take him along for the ride. A scene is a complete unit of conflict. It has its own protagonist, antagonist, start point, escalating conflict, climax, and resolution. In effect, a scene is almost a mini-book. If a scene has no conflict, then it isn't a scene and needs to be discarded.

A SCENE MUST SERVE A PURPOSE WITHIN THE ENTIRETY OF THE NOVEL.

When approaching a scene, don't concern yourself so much with what is going to be in the scene, but rather with what purpose it serves in advancing the plot and developing character.

USING BAD DIALOGUE TAGS

WHY IT IS A MISTAKE: A large percentage of real-life communication is nonverbal. Yet as a writer all you have is words. So new writers tend to try to make up for the lack by using strong dialogue tags (those words that indicate who is speaking). We find people in books doing a lot of shrieking, mumbling, murmuring, shouting, etc. These words are jarring to the reader, especially if you use them more than once. You cannot smile, sigh, or frown a line of speech.

THE SOLUTION: *Said* is a word that is noted but not noticed. Readers flick across *said*, know it indicates who is speaking, and it doesn't jar them. Make sure the dialogue tag accompanies the first sentence of a paragraph of dialogue. Don't wait until the end of the paragraph, making the reader wade through the entire thing before finding out who was doing all the talking.

Other techniques for identifying the speaker are showing action (separated from the dialogue with a period), and referring to the setting.



HANDLING POINT OF VIEW INCORRECTLY

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: Think of point of view like the camera position in a film. If POV is handled badly, readers won't know from which perspective they are viewing the scene, and they could become disoriented. A disoriented reader is an unhappy reader.

THE SOLUTION: Make sure readers know what the POV is. Let's go back to the camera analogy. Pretend you're the film director. Where are you putting the camera to film the scene? When considering how to tell your story, the first thing you have to do is select a point of view (or multiple points of view). This may be the most critical decision after you have your original idea.

Once you've made your choice, your next challenge is to keep the readers oriented as to which camera they are seeing the scene through. This is especially important if you're using multiple viewpoints. In a film, a cut is a change of camera position; in a story, the end of a scene marks any change in POV. Readers have got to know from whose point of view they are viewing the scene. Lose that clarity and you lose your readers.

NOT UNDERSTANDING THE LIMITATIONS OF FIRST-PERSON POV

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: Many novice writers drift toward first-person POV because they think it is the easiest, when in reality it is the most difficult voice to write in.

THE SOLUTION: First person means you use the word *I* quite a bit. It is giving the camera to one character and letting that character film a documentary while doing a voiceover.

The advantage of this POV is that it allows the narrator to tell his own story. The major disadvantage is that the reader can only see and know what the narrator knows. The narrator can be a witness or a participant in the story. You, as the author, are absent in this mode, thus

you surrender part of your control in writing. Remember, the first-person narrator is not you the author, but rather the character in the story.

Note there are certain genres that fit first person very well, most particularly mysteries/detective stories. That's logical if you understand the advantages of first person: By using this mode, you can bring the reader along for the ride, disclosing clues as the narrator discovers them.

Another major disadvantage of first person is that your narrator has to be present in every scene. Because of this, many writers make their narrator the protagonist. The narrator will then be a critical part of the plot and have many things happen to and around him. Will he be able to react realistically while still telling the story in a coherent form? Will he be able to continue narrating in the face of an emotionally overwhelming event?

Can you get your narrator to all the key events in order to narrate them? Inexperienced writers can create very convoluted and unrealistic plots in an attempt to do just that. If the narrator isn't present at these important scenes, then he has to find out about them by other means, which can reduce suspense and the immediacy of the action in the story.

Some authors use a narrator who isn't one of the main characters—a detached narrator. The detached narrator is more of an observer. This has some advantages. Think of the Sherlock Holmes stories—who is narrating? Watson. Why? Because this allows Conan Doyle to withhold what Holmes is thinking from the audience.



FAILING TO CREATE SUBSTANTIAL CONFLICT

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: Without conflict, the reader doesn't care. It's that simple. While we may smile at the image of the happy couple sitting on the park bench holding hands, our attention will quickly wander away from them. They won't engage us. Every scene of a novel, every short story, even every article must have drama, and drama revolves around conflict. And what does conflict revolve around?

CONFLICT REVOLVES AROUND DIFFER- ING MOTIVATIONS IN YOUR CHARACTERS.

THE SOLUTION: There are essentially three types of conflict: inner, which is inside of a person; personal, which is between people; and universal, which is a person battling the system, the government, the world, the gods.

Define your scenes by Character A versus Character B. If you can't do that, "Houston, we have a problem." Conflict doesn't have to be especially violent or significant. It can be as simple as two characters disagreeing over what color paint to select for their bedroom. But that conflict can then be symbolic of deeper conflict in the relationship. Always consider layers to your conflict.

NOT SETTING YOUR SCENES

WHY THIS IS A MISTAKE: A movie or a play has a physical set for the audience to see; all a writer has to work with are words. Too many writers, because they can see their settings in their own heads, assume the reader does too, and therefore don't bother to actually set their scenes. Or they think scene-setting is just a matter of describing the physical environment to the reader.

You have to establish more than the main setting of the story; there are settings for each scene. Every time you move the story to a new scene, you have to orient the reader very quickly. Some authors wait too long to do this or never do it, and the reader feels like he is floating in some featureless void with the characters.

THE SOLUTION: Within the first few paragraphs of a new scene, you should orient the reader to several things:

- *Who is in the scene?* Let the reader know what characters are on stage. Don't have secret agents. Don't have a character lurking about who suddenly speaks three pages into the scene, shocking the reader.
- *Where is this scene?* If it's a new locale, give the reader a feel for the new locale. If it's a location the reader has seen before, let him know if anything has changed.
- *When is this in relation to the previous scene?* Has there been a time lag? How much? What time of day is it? If it's outdoors, what is the weather like? If it's indoors, what is the lighting?
- *What point of view is the reader seeing this scene from?* The POV affects how the reader views the scene.