



Publerati Top Ten Areas for Improvement When Writing Fiction

Thank you for signing up for our e-newsletter. We have created this document to share whatever wisdom we may have with those of you working on writing novels. We hope this helps!

Let's face it, writing fiction is a daunting undertaking. It's heartening that so many people want to write novels, and we want to help you before you get too far along, by identifying some of the most common areas for improvement we see in submissions.

First, a lesson from the Japanese. This may be the most important word to keep in mind when working on your novel and living your life:

Kaizen (改善), is the Japanese word for "continuous improvement." In business, **kaizen** refers to activities that continuously improve all functions and involve all employees from the CEO to assembly-line workers.

So when you find yourself tearing your hair out working on a first draft, or tearing your remaining hair out when revising, keep this important concept in mind. Everything, including your novel, can be improved. How far one takes that improvement depends on the person's open-mindedness.

Here are Top Ten Areas for Improvement:

- 1) **Strive to be Original.** The vast majority of submissions we receive are poor imitations of work already done very well by popular writers. Much of this imitation is subconscious, so pay careful attention to your premise when first setting out. Has it been done before? If so, then why bother?
- 2) **Find Your Own Voice.** Related to the above, try and write in a tone and attitude that is uniquely you. Much of the writing we read has no distinctive voice at all, but is just words strung together on the page lacking flavor. Like a bad soft-serve ice cream cone. Insipid. It might take you much of your life to find your voice. It definitely will take a lot of practice runs. Much work tossed in the trash before you finally start getting the hang of it. Listen to this voice as you walk around town. Finding it is a bit like hitting a baseball: you cannot try too hard or you'll miss. It's a delicate mix of passive and active effort, paying close attention to your subconscious mind.

- 3) **Be Fearless.** You must be confident enough in the mysteries of the creative process to not judge yourself as you write. Just start writing and go with the flow. Even though you cannot see over the next hill, you need to at least get to that hill, which means moving forward. Kurt Vonnegut described it as driving in the fog. What are you afraid of, anyway? If you don't make the drive, someone else will. So go for it. Life is short. We're all going to be dead soon enough. Let yourself go and become the characters on the page. It's fun and rewarding, despite all the difficult work.
- 4) **Read Great Works.** The books you read while writing will influence you. So try and read great literature or non-fiction you admire and study all the problems of fiction: what point of view (or points) is the story told in? How does the author handle time? What do the characters smell, hear, think? How you tell your story is as important as the story itself. Maybe you have noticed this at the movies. The filmmaker and the camera have to have a unique way of telling the story. Maybe we go into the future, then back into the past? Maybe a different character tells the story in each chapter, so the story itself becomes murky, conflicted, fascinating. How is Thomas Hardy telling his story as you read along? Virginia Wolfe? Jane Smiley?
- 5) **Write One Original Metaphor.** You'd be amazed how many submissions do not have a single striking metaphor anywhere within them. Yes, there are hackneyed ones, the ones stuck in your brain because they've been drilled in so many times over your lifetime you don't even think about them as you write on the page. But metaphors allow us to better see inside our characters. A favorite example we cite is the recovering alcoholic, just out of rehab, who drives to the ocean. "The sea looked like a giant Tom Collins." This is great because it helps us understand how difficult it is for the character to even just gaze at the ocean without thinking about the pull of a cocktail. Hit us over the head with an original metaphor in your first two pages. Or on the first page, even better.
- 6) **Create Your Own Analogies for the Writing Process.** This is how you think about and approach your writing. For instance, some writers consider their initial draft to be more of a sketch than a watercolor. But one needs a great sketch to create an even greater watercolor, with all the details filled in as you circle back over and over again, adding texture, detail, and depth. Another analogy is that of the house builder. If you don't pour a good foundation, your work will collapse. Last thing you want is to go right into framing the house when the foundation is weak. Once you have your solid foundation, which you should be able to tell after you've written your opening chapter or two, then you can continue framing the rest of your house. During rewriting, which is typically 60% or more of the total time needed to create readable fiction, you add the trim, the windows, the drapes, the finishing touches that make your house an actual home. Choose whatever analogy works best for you knowing that process is as important as output. They are inextricably linked. Related to the house building metaphor is the notion of having a blueprint. You are the architect of your house. Inspiration will drive much of this, but once you have built a strong foundational premise for your novel, start keeping an outline of where you think it might all go. The novel does not have to go there, but build a plan, a blueprint, that you can revise as you continue framing up your house. Having a map you don't use is still helpful because you created that map, which in itself

can facilitate inspiration. Work your outline and the novel in tandem, if that is how you like to work. There is a useful struggle between the architect and the builder, so think of this when writing.

- 7) **Start Strong, Finish Strong.** You'd be amazed how many published novels are not read past page fifty. The analogy we like is the one of the spinning top in the table-game where the top roams into different compartments. Maybe your top starts out spinning strong, but then wobbles and falls apart on page fifty. Before it even reaches another compartment. Maybe your top is strong all the way to page one hundred, but then wobbles apart. The BIG CHALLENGE is how do you keep your reader engaged for a full novel-length work, when they can easily read something else or watch Netflix? There are some useful formulaic wisdoms that help. Most of the great classics introduce their plots between pages 17-22. That is if you have a plot. If not, by this section the reason to read on should be apparent—the unique language, structure, and voice. Many novels head off in new unexpected directions around page fifty and again on page one hundred. Bringing in new characters can help with this need for new momentum (just as sit-coms have done when running their course or when stars leave). It's okay (maybe desirable) to surprise yourself with an amazing ending and then go back and rewrite the beginning. This happens quite often.
- 8) **Revision.** Many novices think they are done after the first draft. Now is when the hard work starts. Among the hardest of the difficult work is to ask yourself what's missing? Do you have enough detail in your lead character's behavior? Do your characters smell interesting scents, feel interesting textures? Did character John have a cane on page one but is sprinting for a ball on page five? Others will better see these problems than you most likely. How is your pacing? Do you have places where readers may give up? If so, fix them. Who is your intended reader? What will they think? After your first revisions are made, share the novel with a trusted friend or two. Is it work for them to try and read it? Ask them to be honest. Be open to feedback. Don't lock yourself up in denial and ego. Writing a readable novel might be the toughest thing you ever attempt. Unfortunately, very few people can help you fix a broken novel. They simply know it is not working, but cannot tell you why. Outstanding developmental editors are a writer's best friend (as long as you don't get married).
- 9) **Contrast Action with Thought.** The novel is unique in its ability to capture interior life in its true, conflicted depths. If you believe life is defined in the gaps between what people say and what they do, then sculpt your work to take full advantage of this critical juxtaposition. Do you have much interior monologue? Or is your writing just an ongoing chain of actions, without insights? What are your themes and how are they delivered? The old adage "show don't tell" applies here. Bringing characters to full life on stage is difficult work. Speaking of juxtapositions, do you have many in your work? Are there themes that contrast points of view and characters? Write your dichotomies on a piece of paper and think of how many you feel are actually in the work. Try and do this when you first start writing and add to it as you go along. Are they really there? Or in your head? (Another huge challenge!) What kind of moral conflicts, if any, have you created? Which child will Sophie keep? Will the mother leave her husband and hurt the children so she

can have a better life of her own? Should she? Readers love challenging “what if?” dilemmas. Do you have many?

- 10) **Wants.** Who wants what in your novel? If no one wants anything then you have a problem. Readers relate to characters who want something so badly, that they overcome all kinds of obstacles to achieve those wants. Or at least try to. They don’t have to reach their dreams, but they must have them. This is why the journey is the oldest story told, as in *The Odyssey*. Take a loveable character and place her against great odds. Have a nemesis or two or three. Create tension that keeps the reader engaged. Engagement is the goal, a high level of engagement. You want your reader to sob when done with your novel because it is over. And the ending feels just perfect.

Bonus Advice. Revising is like weeding a garden. “Weed it and reap.” “Read it and weep?” Read your work out loud. If anything gives you pause, you probably need to rewrite. Do it. Be ruthless in weeding out adjectives. If we see a lot of adjectives in your opening two pages, we will give up on you. Focus on writing strong sentences that take the reader on a rewarding journey without a lot of waste along the way. Vary your sentences. Some long, some short. Listen to the music of your sentences. Phrasing is as important in writing words as it is in writing music. Pay attention to your rhythm. The beat. The syncopation. Try and write a long paragraph as a challenge. Can you do it? What’s the longest sentence you can write followed by the shortest?

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