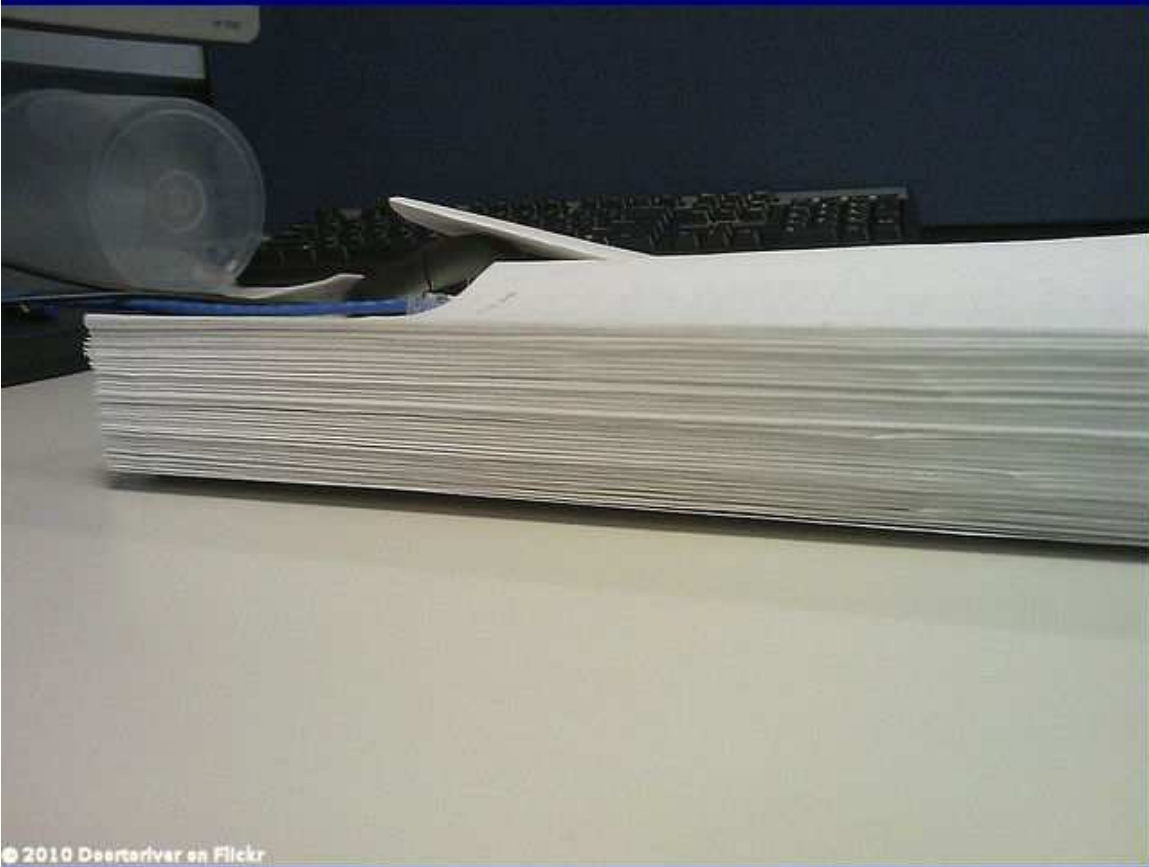


The Sweet Sixteen

What Agents and Editors Want and Don't Want:

8 DON'Ts and 8 DOs To Remember
If You Want To Sell Your Novel Manuscript
To A Big Publisher



© 2010 Deertarivar on Flickr

by **Andrea Rains Waggener**

© 2010 Andrea Rains Waggener. You are free to copy and distribute this e-book as long as you do not change the content.

**The Sweet Sixteen—
What Agents and Editors Want and Don't Want:**

**8 DON'Ts and 8 DOs To Remember If You Want To Sell Your
Novel Manuscript To A Big Publisher**

Just imagine it. You've been working on your novel for weeks, maybe months ... maybe years. You finally finish! You open a bottle of expensive wine. You go out to dinner. You treat yourself to a massage.

You deserve to celebrate. You've accomplished something BIG.

But ... you haven't even begun the *real* work.

Writing is its own reward, but that doesn't mean you don't want to see your words in a book, preferably a book published by a large publisher and sold in bookstores. Although self-publishing is a perfectly acceptable option for authors these days, what author doesn't want the thrill of getting a book contract from one of the "biggies?"

If you look up the large publishers—like Little Brown, Harcourt Brace, Random House, and others—in *Writer's Digest's Novel and Short Story Writer's Market*, you'll find they have something in common. They don't take un-agented manuscripts. If you want to break into this prestigious world, you need an agent.

The time to think about getting an agent is before you write your manuscript. This doesn't mean you go looking for an agent at this point. In most cases, you must have a completed fiction manuscript to land an agent. It does mean, though, that you need to keep in mind as you're writing your masterpiece what agents and editors do and don't want to see in novel manuscripts.

This e-book contains what I call "The Sweet Sixteen"—sixteen don'ts and dos you need to know if you want an agent or want to find a publisher without an agent. I didn't master these dos and don'ts before I wrote my first five novel manuscripts, and guess what? They

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

all got rejected so many times I could wallpaper my office with the rejection letters if I was prone to doom and gloom.

Before I wrote my sixth manuscript, I finally learned, through trial and error (*lots* of trial and error) these must know dos and don'ts. And voila! I sold the manuscript to Bantam Dell, one of the biggest publishers in the world. I actually sold it un-agented because Bantam Dell was still accepting un-agented manuscripts (they no longer do—no big publisher does).

The odds of selling a novel un-agented to one of the largest publishers in the world are greater than winning the lottery. But I beat those odds once I discovered what you're going to learn in this e-book.

If you know about *The Sweet Sixteen* *before* you begin writing your manuscript, you have a huge head start to getting that big publisher book contract all writers dream about. If you've already written your manuscript, don't worry. After you read *The Sweet Sixteen*, go back through your manuscript and evaluate it against the dos and don'ts in this e-book.

Please don't waste your time submitting your work until you're sure you DON'T do any of the 8 don'ts in this e-book and you DO do the 8 DOs. Agents are swamped with queries and manuscripts. Only the manuscripts that stand out will get their attention. *The Sweet Sixteen* guidelines will help you make your manuscript stand out.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

DON'T #1--Don't use clichéd, common phrasing

Clichés and commonly used phrases are the death knell of good writing. Nothing will compel an agent to turn your manuscript into a boomerang, sending it right back to you, faster than mundane phrasing.

Many clichés and common phrases were, at one time, clever and original but because of their cleverness, they have become overused. The phrase, “cool as a cucumber,” for example, is a cliché.

I’m sure whoever said “cool as a cucumber” the very first time was considered quite brilliant. People obviously thought the phrase was clever because they began using it. Thousands and eventually millions of people used it.

Not all clichés are comparisons like this one. Some are simply combinations of words that are used so often, they’ve become old to the point of being grating—sort of like the verbal equivalent of tapping the same spot on your hand over and over. Have you ever done that? It’s quite annoying.

“Last but not least,” “tried and true,” and “trial and error” are examples of overused phrases. They add nothing to a sentence, and yet people use them constantly.

So why do you want to avoid these sorts of clichés and phrases? Here are the three ways they can diminish the quality of your work:

1. They make your writing dull. Compelling writing is writing that grips the reader and drives him or her to keep reading. Why would a reader be gripped by writing filled with phrases the reader has heard a hundred times before?
2. They scream “Beginner!” Professional writers know they need to fill their writing with sparkle and freshness. Beginners have a tendency to regurgitate what they’ve heard or read before.
3. They are the mark of sloppy writing. When writing is filled with clichés, it’s obvious the writer has grabbed whatever phrase has popped into his head the first time around. Cliché-filled writing will never come across as accomplished and polished.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

Rich, unique writing that has its own original style is not filled with clichés or overused expressions. Don't brand your writing as amateur.

Keeping clichés out of your writing is a two step process.

1. Learn to recognize a cliché or overused phrase when you see one. You can identify worn out phrases if you pay attention to what you hear people saying and what you hear on radio and TV. Start keeping a little cliché book. Jot down the phrases that you hear often. These are phrases that either are clichés or will soon be clichés. You want to avoid them.
2. When you realize you've used a cliché or tired phrase, circle it and then ask yourself what word or phrase you could use instead. What is a more original way of saying what you're trying to say?

For example, consider the cliché, "worked like a dog." Instead of using this relic, replace the phrase with a more appropriate verb, a more specific verb like "labored" or "toiled." If you want to use a comparison, brainstorm a few that might work for what you're trying to say.

For example, to replace "worked like a dog," you could try

"worked like a man promised a million dollar bonus for extra hours"

or

"worked like a lion wanting to avoid the whip."

These aren't great, but at least they're different. Replace your clichés with something different, then go back and make sure that what you choose makes sense and fits the piece you're writing. For instance, you wouldn't want to use my second example in a sweet, romantic story. Fit your comparison to what's around it.

If you can keep your writing free of clichés, you'll have better quality writing. Better quality will get an agent's attention.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

DO #1—Do develop an original writing style

The reason many beginning writers resort to clichés and overused phrasing is because they haven't yet found their personal writing style. They're emulating what they've read and heard.

What's a writing style?

If you think of the content of your writing, the story and characters, as a nice new MP3 player you're getting for a friend, writing style is the wrapping you put the player in. It's the packaging.

Writing style is created with word choice and sentence structure. It's the tone your readers "hear" when they read your words.

Most writers tend to write like they talk. Sarcastic people tend to have a sarcastic writing style. Funny people have a funny style. People who speak precisely tend to write in a more formal style, using larger words.

All of this is fine. In fact, if you let your writing follow your speaking style, you're far more likely to write in an original way. Writers get in trouble when they *try* to create a great writing style. Instead of being genuine, their words come out as forced and contrived ... and yes, clichéd.

You'd think that if we tend to write like we talk it would be easy to have a unique style. Unfortunately, most writers can't let it be that easy. Why?

First, most of us have to unlearn all the formal rules we learned in school, rules like: never end a sentence in a preposition, don't start a sentence with because, and don't use sentence fragments. These are fine grammatical rules, but they have nothing to do with fiction writing style. You need to contort the rule book a bit when you write a novel. Sure, you need to know the rules; know them so you can break them on purpose now and then.

The second reason you may not be able to let your unique style out is you've read so many novels you're unconsciously copying other writers' styles. This happens especially when you haven't done much writing practice. You sit down to write a novel, and your brain

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

automatically goes to what you've read in the past. You try to be a Stephen King or Nicholas Sparks or Dan Brown without realizing that's what you're doing.

Unfortunately, agents can sniff out inauthentic style at 100 yards. They know derivative work when they see it. And they surely know clichéd work when they see it.

So how can you let your style come out to play?

One word.

Practice.

The time to develop your style is before you ever sit down to write a story or a novel. You need to write so much that your style can't help but come out.

It's a process not unlike learning a musical instrument. When you first start to play the piano or guitar or whatever, you may start getting the notes right, but they'll sound stilted. The music won't have any feeling. Feeling (like writing style) comes out naturally with practice.

The most effective way to develop a unique style free of clichés and overused phrasing is to get in the habit of doing daily timed writings. I teach the specifics of timed writings in my [Novel Writing Made Easy System](#), but all you need to know to get started are these steps:

1. Choose a set time (start with 5 minutes and work up to a ½ hour if you have the time).
2. Pick a starter phrase or word. I provide daily prompts at my blog, [Dogging the Words](#). When you subscribe to the blog, the daily practice prompts will come to your inbox and remind you to do your timed writing for the day.
3. Start a timer. I use <http://www.online-stopwatch.com/> but you can use any timer you want.
4. Write. You can write either in longhand (my preference) or on the computer. Once you start writing, DO NOT STOP until the timer goes off. It doesn't matter whether you're writing drivel or you're repeating your starter phrase over and over.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

You'll be amazed that once you do this a few times, the prompt and timer will activate a vein of creativity you didn't even know you had. When it doesn't at first, just keep going, and you'll usually stumble onto some rich writing that spills forth seemingly out of nowhere. When this happens, you'll be writing in your style.

The more you do timed writings the more natural your own style will become.

A caveat, though. Even when you get in the groove of your own style, you can unconsciously reach for overused phrases. I recommend training yourself to look for original phrasing in all of your speech and even your thought. I teach you to do this in the "How to Improve Your Writing Without Even Writing Audios" included in [*The Novel Writing Made Easy System*](#). These audios help you develop a habit of wording your thoughts in original ways.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

DON'T #2—Don't start with the blahs

Remember that line from *Jerry Maguire*—“You had me at hello?”

If only agents, editors, and book buyers were so easy. They're not.

Agents I've met at conferences have told me that they look at the first paragraph of a submission, and if doesn't grab them, they never even glance at the rest of the pages. Put an agent to sleep with your novel opening, and no matter how stellar the rest of your manuscript is, you won't find representation, which means you won't sell it.

So what's a blah opening?

Here are three types of openings that will kill your novel on the first page:

1. The “dark and stormy night” opening. Face it. The weather just isn't that compelling most of the time. Neither are intricate setting descriptions of any kind. If you bog your novel down in the setting at the opening, you are quite likely going to give your reader the blahs.

Of course, there are exceptions to this rule (as there are for all rules). A setting description (including weather) that is so keenly written that it creates a sense of foreboding or intrigue can be effective, but trust me—it takes a strong writer to pull this off.

2. The “she was born on” opening, otherwise known as the back story opening. Many classic novels from the 1800s and 1900s have back story openings, and yes, they were published, and yes, they're famous. But Ted Bundy, the serial killer is famous too. Does that mean he's good?

Back story, your characters' histories, is essential to developing character and story in a novel, but it is rarely intriguing enough to be an effective opening *unless* it's told in a specific way—through flashback. If your character has had a particularly riveting event happen in his or her past and it's relevant to the story, you may want to start the novel in the midst of that old action. Clive Cussler uses this technique consistently in his Dirk Pitt novels. The trick of this kind of opening is to tell the past events as if they're happening now. The

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

opening must come across as immediate, not distant like a history lesson.

Many romance novels and mysteries open with back story that's more effective than any sleep aid for a good snooze. Authors like to put their main character on a plane, train, or in an automobile and while they're on their way to a new location, let them think about the events that led them up to this point in time. Don't do this. It's boring.

3. The "How are you? I'm fine" opening. Opening your novel with dialogue can be effective, but not if it's mundane dialogue. If you're going to put words in your character's mouths in the first couple paragraphs, make sure they're captivating words.

Some writers think that because they start their novel with an argument, they've started in an active way. This is only true if the subject of the argument is intriguing. No one is going to care about a married couple talking about dirty socks left on the floor, but they probably will care about two terrorists discussing a plot to release a killer virus in a grade school. If you go with a dialogue opening, choose the topic well.

When you're writing your novel, it's natural to start it too early in the action of the story. It's in your head like a time line. You know when the first events happened and what happened after that and after that, but if you lay it out that way on the page, you're creating a blah opening.

Be hyper-honest with yourself when you evaluate your first paragraphs. You like them because you agonized over them. But do they really pull the reader into the story?

Because that's what you have to do. You have to suck (in a good way) agents into your manuscript with the power of a mega-horsepower shop vac.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

DO #2—Do hook your readers

The opposite of a blah opening is one that hooks the reader from the first paragraph and almost literally drags him into the rest of the story. No pressure here, but an opening hook must get the reader's attention. It's the literary equivalent of a naked person walking down the middle of a busy street.

So what hooks readers?

Action.

By action, I don't mean whap, pow, bam super hero action. No one needs to be running or jumping or blowing anything up.

Action in a novel is conflict. It *can be* fighting or running for your life, but it can also be as simple as arriving at a new place, having a conversation, or even thinking about a problem.

Conflict, which I discuss in detail in [Novel Writing Made Easy](#), is what happens when your character has a goal (wants something or is trying to do something) and something (a person, a situation, or the character herself) is standing in the way of achieving that goal. Conflict is frustration and uncertainty. Conflict is struggle.

To open your novel in conflict, you must start in the middle of action.

For example, let's say your novel is about a man, we'll call him Joe, who has invented a machine that will transport things from one location to another something like they do so easily in *Star Trek*. He knows that his invention is worth billions, but he also knows that his life isn't worth a cent if the wrong people find out what he has.

Joe needs to get his machine to a man, we'll call him Bill, he trusts. Since the contraption is huge, and he has no good place to hide it, he decides to take it with him. To do this, he has to get his hands on enough money to rent a large enough truck, and though he's poised on the brink of riches, he has no money now.

A blah opening for this story would be to relate how Joe went about inventing his machine, how he reasoned his way to taking his invention to this one man he trusts, how he rented the truck. An

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

opening hook requires that we bypass all that and go back to tell the reader about it later in the story.

How about this?

Maria would have told him to just use the damn thing—pop into Bill’s study, grab him, and pop back here. Then Bill could help him hide it.

But Maria wasn’t here because she’d been so insistent on being the first one to use it. If the same freak circumstances happened again before he worked out the bugs...? No way. A dead Bill wasn’t going to be much help. Joe couldn’t handle more pain.

I just wrote those lines in about two minutes. If this was a real story and I was writing a real manuscript, I’d play with them a lot more. But this opening illustrates the most important thing an opening hook has to do: it peaks the reader’s curiosity. It gets the reader asking questions.

Great novel openings create story questions from the first sentence. Story questions, which I explain how to create in [Novel Writing Made Easy](#), are the invisible strings that pull your readers through your story.

You want your reader to start wondering, asking internal questions, from the first paragraph. And you want these questions to be unanswered.

Look at the sample novel opening above. What questions does it generate?

What *is* the damn thing? What does it mean to pop in and out? Why does it need to be hidden? Who was Maria? What were the freak circumstances? Is this guy doing something evil or something good?

An opening hook is like a question generator. It blasts open your reader’s mind and jumpstarts curiosity. It creates an absolute *need to know* what happens next.

Here’s how to create an opening like this:

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

First, pick a dozen or so of your favorite novels. Read the opening paragraph. Write down all the story questions (unanswered questions) that pop into your head when you read the opening (forget that you know the answers to those questions now that you've read the whole book). This exercise will show you how just a few words can generate a whole lot of questions.

Second, think about which aspect of your story's beginnings would be the most open ended. At what point in the early time line in your plot would the events or dialogue or setting create the most curiosity?

Write five or more openings that put your character in the middle of some conflict that suggests many questions to the reader. Which one would spark the most curiosity? Which one has the most pull?

That's your opening hook.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

DON'T #3—Don't skimp on character or put boring words in your character's mouths

One of the biggest mistakes I see in my coaching clients' work is what I call skimpy or boring characters. Skimpy characters are characters with no depth, no layers. Boring characters are ones that have nothing compelling to say.

A skimpy character is like a cardboard cut-out. He or she has just the most basic defining qualities. Skimpy characters are generally lacking in seven main areas:

1. Physical characteristics. A skimpy character has only the most basic description—hair color, body weight and shape, and eye color. Real people aren't this vague. If your character has only the bare minimum descriptors, he or she is going to come across like a shadow on the page.
2. Speech patterns. A skimpy character talks like everyone else. Or rather, he or she probably talks like you do. If your characters aren't so real to you that you can hear them talking in your head, they're probably all going to sound like you.
3. Mannerisms. A skimpy character generally falls on one side or the other of the mannerism scale. Either she has no discernable mannerisms at all so that she comes across on the page like a stiff automaton who just says her lines OR she has one or two mannerisms her creator (i.e. author) likes so much that she has to do them over and over.

Some of my coaching clients send me manuscripts in which the characters walk and talk but otherwise can't be distinguished from one another in their actions. These characters are so fake and flat that I have trouble keeping them straight while I'm reading and editing.

The flip side of the problem is being too in love with a mannerism. In my first attempt at a novel, my main character, Max, blinked so many times, my ex-husband (my first reader) was compelled to count the blinks. They totaled a whopping 107 in a 400 page manuscript. Talk about embarrassing. Max also tugged on her hat a lot—33 times to be exact.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

4. Background. A skimpy character has only the bare sketch of a background. The author knows, for instance, the character was an only child and grew up in a small town and was good in school, but the author has no specific events from that past.

5. Personality. Skimpy characters are one or two dimensional. They might be smart and sassy. They might be nervous and boring. They might be dumb and rude. They are nice. They are tough. They are ruthless. But they aren't real.

6. Habits. Skimpy characters don't have time for many habits. They're too busy being yanked through the story doing things the author needs them to do to fulfill the plot.

7. Belongings. Skimpy characters live in generic surroundings. They may have a well-described home or car or work place, but they don't have items that are so unique to them that the items reveal their character.

A boring character, however complex, is one whose dialogue is so mundane that reading it is like reading a transcript of your daily conversations with your spouse and kids. I'd be willing to bet you don't often have scintillating, intriguing discussions.

You mostly talk about routine stuff, don't you? You discuss what you did today, what you need to get at the store, what you're having for dinner.

This is real world dialogue, and though you want your characters to seem as "real" as possible, if you put "real" dialogue in their mouths, you'll bore your readers to death.

Here's an example of the kind of mundane dialogue that will get your manuscript tossed in the trash faster than you can say "boring."

"So, what will you do?" Jane asked.

"I'm packing the stuff... the non-essentials..." Celia replied, as if talking more to herself than to her companions.

"How are you holding up?" Pam inquired.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

“Getting through the holidays was rough...” Celia said softly.

“How is he doing?” Pam asked.

“He knew this was coming because he planned it. He’s fine!” Celia said with some hostility in her voice.

“What about you?” Jane asked.

“He never thought about me at all,” Celia wanted to make this fact painfully clear.

“How can you say that?” Pam asked.

“He never had to. I was young; I had no education; I was a stay-at-home mom. I had nothing of my own,” Celia revealed with sadness.

“What about the kids?” Jane asked.

“I feel guilty about the kids, but what can I do?”

“But you had a partnership?” Jane replied, sounding very much like an attorney.

“Our marriage was never a partnership. He never considered me a partner. We had nothing in common. So, he could just move on.” Celia said, shaking her head.

“After all these years?” Jane had to ask, as if she was having trouble understanding what was happening to her friend.

Sleepy yet?

Dialogue like this is too ordinary, too predictable to be even remotely interesting. The dialogue tags (example—“Jane replied, sounding very much like an attorney” are problems too because they’re stilted and do much more telling than showing).

Dialogue like this is like a toxin that will poison a manuscript.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

Novels are about people, and those people must be interesting. They must seem real. They must take believable action, and they must talk in intriguing ways.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

DO #3--Do create unique characters who have interesting things to say

So how do you go from skimpy and boring characters to full and rich characters? Honing in on the same seven essentials I listed above, you fill in some details.

1. Physical characteristics. Real people have scars and moles, crooked teeth, wrinkles, cowlicks, blemishes, cellulite, asymmetrical features, unusual teeth, odd shaped mouths. To create a fully drawn character, you must know the character's physicality as well as you know your own.

One of the best ways to come up with specifics for your character is to think about your own perceived flaws. What don't you like about your own body? There's probably something there you can use. On the other side of the scale, think about someone you find attractive. What specifics make the person attractive to you. It's probably not just hair color, height, and eye color. It's a particular feature.

Go for specificity in description. Go for unique and interesting.

2. Speech patterns. Fully developed characters have specific ways of talking. They may use more long sentences than short. They may speak mostly in questions. They may change subjects a lot and sound like a stream of conscious word explosion. They may swear like a street thug or sound as uptight as a Victorian nanny.

Real characters have favorite expressions and exclamations. They have specific speech rhythms.

3. Mannerisms. Real people have mannerisms, a whole range of them. I twirl my hair when I'm thinking. My husband, Tim, bounces his foot and talks to himself when he's deep in thought. Tim also has a noticeable head tilt that gets worse when he's confused, and he runs his hand through his hair so often, by the end of the day, it's often standing on end. If I were to create a character like him, I'd mention these actions perhaps three to five times in the whole manuscript, just enough to establish the mannerisms without beating the mannerisms to death.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

You need to know your character's usual facial expressions. And what does he or she do with his hands or feet? How does he or she express the basic emotions of sadness, happiness, anger, or frustration?

Good writing is about showing not telling. You need to be able to describe your character's physical reactions well enough that your reader will know the character is angry without you saying the character is angry.

4. Background. Real characters have rich pasts with dozens of events that shaped personality and beliefs. They had friends and enemies. They had disappointments and triumphs. They had love and loss.

When you create your character, you need to be able to tell his whole story. A good character bio has at least five pages of history, a mini memoir that brings him to life.

5. Personality. Real characters have so many different personality characteristics they could be accused of being multiple personalities. But if you draw these qualities together with a unifying quality, you pull off the package.

For example, you may have a character who is critical and judgmental, superficial, materialistic, negative, and complaining. This character could also love animals and children and go out of her way to help someone in need. This person could love her children with a passion, be unfailingly loyal to her husband, and be truly awesome in her work. How would you link these two seemingly disparate sets of qualities? You make the character controlling. It's the control factor that would run through every aspect of her personality. She loves animals, yes, but she wants to control how they're treated.

In [*Novel Writing Made Easy*](#), I share some helpful tools and tricks that make it easy to flesh out a complete personality profile. I also reveal the personality/background elements you must have to make your characters actions in the story believable—what I call the MMEs and the MMBs.

6. Habits. Real people have a myriad of habits. We have habits of routine and habits of thought. A fully developed character has at least a dozen interesting habits. The way to make a character stand out is to make at least one of those habits unusual to the point of quirkiness. For example, in the U.S. TV show, *Kojak*, the main character, a tough

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

cop, sucked on a lollypop. In the U.S. TV show, *Monk*, the main character, a brilliant detective, used wipes every time he touched something or someone.

7. Belongings. A well drawn character has at least three or four items around him that grab a reader's attention and say something important about the character. A highbrow professor keeps a scuffed softball on his desk. A tough street cop wears a diamond necklace hidden under her uniform. A vampire slayer has a stuffed bear.

To create a truly fascinating and real-life character, you need to have all details of the character's physical and mental qualities and his or her history and surroundings laid out. I provide a template for a full character sketch in [Novel Writing Made Easy](#) that has guidelines for filling in essential details.

And do you use every detail you know about your characters? Absolutely not. You use what is necessary to tell the story. But if you don't know the details, you won't be able to bring your character to full life within the story.

And now that you have a well drawn character, how do you make sure he or she sounds interesting?

Let's take the dialogue sample I used in the Don't section above and rework it so it's more interesting. We'll use the same situation—three friends talking about one friend's (Celia's) impending marriage break-up.

"So how're you going to make lemonade out of this suckiness?" Jane asked.

Celia glared. "You and your lemonade out of lemons. I hate lemonade. I'm packing, and it sucks ... like sour lemons."

"I'd be pissed too," Pam said.

"It's not just anger. I know I should hate him, but ..."
Celia closed her eyes and turned away.

"What's his story?" Pam asked. "I thought you two were good together."

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

Celia's eyes snapped open. She spat her words. "Oh, he's swilling 38DD lemonade!"

"You need some sugar." Jane waved a packet under her friend's nose and made kissy noises.

"I'm not ready." Celia snatched the packet and crushed it. "I trusted him, and he wasn't who he said he was. And he didn't care about me at all."

"Reality check," Jane said. "He cared once."

"I'm not so sure. Even if he did—he had his agenda. I was a stay at home mom ... beneath him."

"What about the kids?" Pam asked.

"It's not going to be good, but I'm doing it anyway."

Pam sighed. "I thought you two were a partnership. You were my role models."

"Sorry to disappoint. He never considered me a partner." Celia grimaced. "A slave maybe."

"Forget the lemonade. We need to talk about cooking up a dish of revenge." Pam narrowed her eyes and leaned toward Celia. "I have an idea."

A caveat about this rewrite. It's impossible to write truly good dialogue if you're not perfectly clear about the dialogue's purpose in the scene. In this case, I don't have a context for the dialogue within the novel, so this is an incomplete rewrite.

But, notice that in the rewrite, the dialogue has more bite and more personality. You get a sense of Jane's and Pam's character by what they're saying. The same basic information comes through, but it does so in a more intriguing way and in a way that makes the characters more than flat placeholders on the page.

What I just did with this example illustrates four essentials in good dialogue:

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

1. Dialogue must develop character and/or impart information essential to the story. Anything superfluous to these two goals is deadwood in your novel. No matter how clever you think your dialogue is, if it doesn't expand on character or story, it needs to be cut.
2. Dialogue should keep story questions going. The original version of the dialogue just put the information out there and didn't raise many questions. My rewrite raised a few questions. What was the husband's agenda? What's going on with the kids? What's Pam's revenge idea?
3. Dialogue should be as brief as possible. This is not to say that all characters must speak in short sentences and paragraphs, but you want to use as little dialogue as possible to get as much information across as possible. The only exception to that rule is for characters who are longwinded by nature. Even then, you don't let them go on as long as they would in real life.
4. Dialogue should be hooked to simple dialogue tags or paired with character action that shows how the character feels. Many beginning writers try to get too creative with dialogue tags (he said, she asked etc.). They think saying "said" over and over is boring, so they try to mix it up with "asserted" or "put forth" or "expounded," and other such awkward tags.

A good rule of thumb is to stick to "said" and "asked" as much as possible unless your character is talking in a particular tone, like "whispered" or "yelled." You can leave out the dialogue tag when you place an action sentence next to the dialogue, as in the second and fourth and other paragraphs of the example above. You also can just let the dialogue stand alone if it's clear who is talking. The more unique you make your character's speech, the less you need dialogue tags.

Fiction dialogue is a sort of shorthand version of real world talk. You would never take a real conversation and transcribe it into a story, no matter how interesting the conversation subject was. You would carve it up and thin it down. Good, interesting fiction dialogue needs to be lean and precise.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

If you create a complete character sketch for your characters and you keep these dialogue essentials in mind when you put words in your character's mouths, your characters will come to life on the pages of your novel.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

DON'T #4—Don't let your story plod

Plodding stories have three things in common:

1. They're too linear. Plodding stories move from event to event to event like the ramblings of a diary instead of hopping from key event to consequence to another key event that is at odds with the first one.

In the movie, *Clean Slate*, Dana Carvey's character, Maurice L. Pogue, finds himself on stage pretending to be a speaker talking about his travels through a foreign country. In the spotlight in front of a map, Pogue picks up a pointer and taps it on the map and says, "First we went here." He taps another point. "Then here." Tap. "Then here." Tap. "Then here."

It's a hilarious scene, but it's also a good illustration of what *not* to do in your novel's plot. You do NOT want to go from here, to here, to here, to here.

Here's an example of a here to here to here blah story plot:

Freddy needs to get his family back from Dominic, the man who kidnapped them. He goes to the man's place of work and fights his way through a factory until he gets his hands on the man's assistant. He beats up the assistant and forces him to tell Freddy where Dominic took the family. He leaves the factory and drives through a terrible storm and heavy traffic to get to a mountainside cabin, where his family is hidden. He hears them yelling. He fights his way past five ninja warriors hired by Dominic, and finally he faces Dominic himself. The two men battle it out. Freddy defeats Dominic and rescues his family.

Even beginning fiction writers know that novel stories need conflict. However not every writer understands what riveting conflict looks like on the page. Many writers mistake fighting and action with actual conflict. You'll notice in the story above, Freddy has a lot of conflict with other people. He fights his way through the whole story. But is it interesting? Is it suspenseful? Do you care?

Probably not.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

And why don't you care? Because the plot just moves from here to here to here to here. It has no twists, no turns, no surprises.

2. They have plug-and-play characters. In plodding stories, it doesn't matter who's going through the events because the events don't impact character.

Look at Freddy's story again. Notice how the plot isn't in any way hinged on Freddy's character. We could plug in almost any person for Freddy and get the same story.

A plodding story is a series of events with no engaging give and take between the characters and what's happening around them. For example, you can put a character—we'll call her Fiona—in a mystery novel and watch her solve a mystery. You can have a dead body or two or three. You can have 100 suspects. You can have Fiona fight and run for her life. But if Fiona isn't in some way personally affected by this mystery and these suspects and her fights, the story is going to plod.

3. They're too relentless. Even if your novel is full of action, even if it goes faster than a supersonic jet, it can plod. A plodding novel has too much of the same thing over and over. It has no variety to keep your readers interested.

Do you see how Freddy's story has him racing from one fight to the next? Fights may be conflict, but string enough of them together, and who cares?

It's a cliché (and you know how I feel about clichés), but it's true—variety is the spice of life ... and novels. It's called pacing. You have to vary the tempo of your story, balance the intense scenes with the quieter ones.

Look over your manuscript and see if it suffers from any of these blahs before submitting. No matter how wonderful the writing, if the plot sags, the manuscript will land in a trashcan.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

DO #4—Do have a “sticky plot”

A sticky plot is a plot that keeps your readers stuck to the story. Your reader has to keep reading in order find out what happens, because your reader cares enough about the characters to *have to know* what happens to them.

Sticky plots have six essential elements:

1. A main character or characters who has three important qualities:
 - a. The character has a driving need or goal, something that he or she **MUST** get done.
 - b. The character has a strong trait, something that gives him or her a way to achieve what he or she wants.
 - c. The character has some “fatal flaw,” some trait that will lead the character to failure unless the character overcomes it.
2. A set of existing circumstances that introduces this character and introduces questions the reader must get answered.
3. A big happening that catapults the character into a struggle to achieve his or her goal.
4. A series of events that make the problem worse and worse and worse while also revealing the character’s struggle with his or her flaw.
5. A final showdown in which the character’s strength must overcome his or her flaw to resolve the main problem.
6. A structure that gives the story a varied rhythm that draws the reader inexorably to the story’s conclusion.

Now let’s go back to Freddy’s story and see if we can fix it to make it stickier.

Freddy is a happy family man who has a comfortable, routine life. Freddy is a smart man, but he’s also very rigid and controlling. He needs things to be just right. Dominic, a man who wants Freddy’s invention, kidnaps

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

Freddy's family. At first, Freddy goes to the police, even though Dominic warns him not to, because Freddy is afraid to leave his ordered life to go looking for his family. Dominic finds out and sends Freddy his son's ear in a padded envelope. So Freddy, sticking to a rigid plan, goes to the man's place of work. He tries to use reason and his plan to get into the factory, but it doesn't work and he ends up having to fight his way in. He finally reaches Dominic's assistant and again tries to think his way through the situation, and because of it, the assistant gets away. Fast forward through a series of events that force Freddy to move out of his rigid comfort zone. Eventually, Freddy and Dominic battle it out. In order to defeat Dominic, Freddy has to completely give in to the chaos around him and give up his need to control events. In fact, it's the chaos that ends up saving the day.

Obviously, this is just a whiff of what a full plot would need to be and it's still missing something it needs in order to have even a chance of being a decent novel, but do you see the difference between the two stories? One is a string of events and the other is a crescendo of events that lead to character transformation. This is what creates a sticky plot.

When you start with the right plot elements and combine them with good pacing you will create a plot that readers will stick with until the end. I discuss pacing in detail in [Novel Writing Made Easy](#), and I lay out a structure that makes putting a sticky plot together almost foolproof—a method I call The Staircase Method.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

DON'T #5—Don't leave out the layers

When you get an idea for a novel, the idea is generally pretty one-dimensional at first. For example, Stephanie Meyer's idea for the *Twilight* series was a teenage girl who falls in love with a vampire. My idea for *Alternate Beauty* was a fat woman who wakes up in a world where fat is beautiful. In the Freddy example of the last couple sections, the idea is a man who has to get his family back from kidnappers.

The underlying concept of your novel—your original idea—is what screenwriters refer to as the A story. It's the main course of the tale you want to tell.

A good novel, though, must have more than just a main course. It has to have at least one strong "B" story. It must have one or more subplots.

So what's a subplot? A subplot is a secondary story that has the same kind of conflict to resolution arc as your main plot. In other words, it is a small story that has a character in a current situation who faces some event that creates a problem that needs to be solved and must overcome obstacles to resolve the problem or (in the case of tragedies) be defeated by it at the end of the book.

Subplots are the layers to your story. Without layers, your story will be flat and uninteresting. In the last section, I said that the Freddy story is missing something necessary for a decent novel. What it's missing is layers. The story is just one arc that focuses only on Freddy's desire to save his family.

When you first start writing novels, it's easy to leave out the subplots because you get so involved with the main plot. When I first plotted *Alternate Beauty*, I was totally wrapped up in mapping out the main character, Ronnie's, journey through the alternate universe she finds herself in. Every scene I planned was related to telling that story. I had written 100 pages of the manuscript when I realized that the book was plodding along and definitely missing something.

That's when it dawned on me I had no subplots. I went back to my outline and created two subplots. I reworked my pages, and suddenly my plodding manuscript took on life.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

A novel without subplots is like baklava made with pizza dough. It's heavy and dull. Good stories have layers.

But not all layers are created equal. Subplots aren't simply stories that run alongside the main story. Tell too many stories in your manuscript, and you'll fracture your readers' attention. In the next section, I'll give you the essential secrets to creating masterful subplots.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

DO #5—Do weave subplots into the main plot

So what exactly does a subplot look like? Here are a couple of examples from well-known movies:

In the classic *My Fair Lady*, the main plot is Henry Higgins' attempt to turn Eliza, a cockney girl, into a cultured lady who could pass as a duchess. Two subplots are Eliza's courtship with Freddy and her father's journey toward respectability.

In *Spiderman*, the main plot is Peter's conflict with the green goblin. The subplot is his frustrated romance with Mary Jane.

As I said in the last section, a subplot is like a mini story that has its own arc. This is a decent definition of a subplot, but it's not complete.

A good subplot isn't just any old mini story. It's not a story that runs alongside the main story. It's story that must have two more important components:

1. A good subplot is a story that weaves in and out of the action of the main plot. In other words, the subplot enhances the main story in some important way. It fleshes out the story and reveals an essential aspect of character by exploring the main character's desires, personal issues, and growth. It also often reveals the theme of the novel because the main plot frequently doesn't have room to delve into deep life issues. Subplots are a place to explore these ideas.
2. A good subplot is a story that contributes to the resolution of the main plot.

Tess Gerritson's *Body Double*, is a masterful example of a story with layered subplots that meet the above criteria. In *Body Double*, the main character, Maura, is trying to figure out who killed the twin sister she hadn't known she'd had until the sister's body is found in front of Maura's house and she's also trying to find out about her past. The main plot is her investigation into her history and her sister's death.

In the process of this investigation, Maura meets a police officer who had tried to help and had been involved with Maura's sister. Maura develops feelings for him. The relationship between her and the officer is one of the book's subplots.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

The relationship does much to reveal Maura's character and helps her discover things about her sister's death and her own plot, so the subplot moves in and out of the main story line. Near the end of the book, the relationship also ends up playing a pivotal role in resolving the main plot, solving the sister's murder.

In *Alternate Beauty*, the main plot is Ronnie's struggle to accept her size and fit into society—whether ours or an alternate one. One of the subplots is about her relationship with a young girl in a girls' club for which Ronnie volunteers. The subplot weaves in and out of the main plot and mirrors Ronnie's struggles in other areas of her life, and near the end, it plays an integral role in bringing Ronnie to the revelation that allows her to overcome her self esteem issues once and for all.

When you create your subplots, look for seemingly extraneous entanglements or problems for your main character. I say seemingly because at first, if you plot your book well, your subplot will appear to be just another odd happening in your character's life. As your story progresses, though, this odd happening moves closer and closer to impacting the main story line. Ideally, your subplot will resolve right along with your main plot.

When you look for these small stories to tell and find ways to tell them that enhance your main story, you create layers that will keep your readers engaged right to the end of your manuscript.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

DON'T #6—Don't get sloppy with point of view

What's wrong with this scene?

Darla covered her nose and squinted at the smoke invading the room through the cracks around the thick oak door. She pounded on the wall.

"Help me!"

She remembered her training and got down on the floor, trying to find fresh air. How had she gotten herself into this situation? She should have listened to Kevin. He was right. She did always charge into things without thinking.

Something crashed into the door from outside the room. A dark-haired fireman called, "Step away from the door, ma'am."

"Thank God," Darla gasped. She crawled behind a chair and thought about what she'd discovered before someone had locked her into the room. For a second there, she'd thought she wouldn't live to tell anyone about it.

Did you spot the main problem with this scene?

I'll give you a hint. It's a point of view issue.

Novels are told in one of four points of view:

1. First person point of view is when the main character narrates the story. This is the *I-Me-Mine* point of view. Everything in the story is told through the main character's perspective. This means that every event in the story must be something that the main character experiences him or herself or something he or she is told by another character or outside source like a newspaper.
2. Second person point of view is rare, but it can be effective in deft hands. It's told from the *You* perspective. The author is speaking directly to the reader.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

3. Third person limited point of view is much like first person except instead of *I-Me-Mine*, the author uses *he* or *she*. The story is told in the third person of he or she, but it's limited to what that he or she is experiencing. In other words, the reader is inside one character's head at a time. Third person limited can be done by limiting the viewpoint to one character throughout the entire manuscript or by shifting between characters in sections or chapters of the book.

4. Third person omniscient point of view is the *he or she* viewpoint with the author dipping into the head of every character in the book. This viewpoint is generally more on the surface and is often used for action stories. The author acts sort of like the god of the story and plucks out whatever information he or she wants to reveal.

Once you choose a point of view, you must stick with it. One of the most common beginner mistakes novelists make is sloppy point of view.

What's sloppy point of view? It's what happened in that scene I opened this section with. Look at the paragraph that starts with "Something crashed against the door." Do you see the problem?

The scene is clearly being told from Darla's perspective. We're in her head. We're experiencing what she's experiencing. So how would she know the fireman is dark haired? He's outside the wood door.

Sloppy point of view issues are generally like this example. They occur in first person point of view or third person limited point of view. They reveal information that the viewpoint character wouldn't know. When this happens, the author slips back and forth between third person limited and omniscient.

As a general rule, first person and third person limited are the most effective points of view for most stories. This means that once you decide whose head you're in, you need to stay there.

If, for instance, in the scene above, a second character was present in the room with Darla, and after she was established as the viewpoint character (which is done by having her observe her surroundings and react to them), anything that second character is thinking would be off limits. A paragraph like this would be sloppy:

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

Behind the chair, Darla bumped into Mary, who crouched with her knees tucked against her chest. Mary rocked back and forth, keening, and thought about her husband. Would she get to see him again?

Since Darla is the viewpoint character of this scene, we can't get in Mary's head. If it's important to reveal that Mary is thinking about her husband, she has to say so to Darla, or Darla has to guess that's what Mary is thinking about.

If you don't want to get branded as a novice, pay attention to point of view. Slipping into other viewpoints when you've chosen first person or third person limited (which as I said are the most common and effective points of view) is sloppy writing that will land your manuscript in the trash.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

DO #6—Do create strong voices

The best way to make sure that you stay in your chosen viewpoint is to create strong character voices. Whether you decide to have one voice using first person or third person or you choose to have three or four limited viewpoints that you move between throughout your story, each of those viewpoints must have a unique voice.

What is a “voice?”

When I say character voice, I’m not talking about the sound the person makes when he or she talks. I’m talking about her unique way of seeing and processing the world.

Good novels, and movies for that matter, have strong character voices. Think of Juno in *Juno* or John McClane in the *Die Hard* movies or Eve Dallas in J.D. Robbs’ Eve Dallas mystery series. These characters have so much personality that their personality touches everything they experience, and when you move through the story from their perspective, you see it *their* way.

Here’s an example of a scene with a strong first person viewpoint character:

“So who’s going to die today, Joy? Seen any creepy visions lately?”

The voice was as obnoxious as a Western gull’s cackle.

I shot what I hoped was a warning look at Becky, my ex-friend. Curly blond hair pinned up in that haphazard way that was supposed to look casual but actually took an hour to achieve, deep-set blue eyes, model thin, wearing low-ride jeans and a red scarf-print kimono top—Becky was all that, or at least she thought so. So did her best friend, another of my ex-friends, Rachel, who did her best to be a Becky-look-alike. Rachel had pretty light brown hair five years ago. Now it was dyed blonde. She couldn’t afford blue contacts apparently, so she went with blue eye shadow. And she didn’t have Becky’s pouty lips, so she went around puckering hers all the time to try and get the

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

same affect. She looked like she was always blowing up imaginary balloons.

Joy lifted her chin and started to push past the evil fake twins. The third of the terrible trio, Amber, extended a small foot. Joy tripped. I caught her and stepped toward Amber.

Without me telling you thing about this viewpoint character, you get a sense of her, don't you? She's tough. She's sarcastic. She can't stand fakes. She's confident. Notice that I never say that she's any of these things, but just by the way she sees her ex-friends and processes what she's seeing and hearing, these qualities come through.

Now let's try this same scene from a weaker viewpoint:

"So who's going to die today, Joy? Seen any creepy visions lately?"

I stopped and looked at the speaker, Becky, my ex-friend. Curly blond hair pinned up in that masterful way that looked casual but actually took skill to achieve, deep-set blue eyes, model thin, wearing low-ride jeans and a red scarf-print kimono top—Becky was gorgeous and popular. Every girl in the school wanted to be like her, especially Rachel. Rachel had pretty light brown hair five years ago. Now it was dyed blonde. She didn't have blue eyes, so she used blue eye shadow. And she didn't have Becky's pouty lips, so she puckered hers all the time to get the same affect.

Joy lifted her chin and started to push past Becky, Rachel, and the third of the popular trio, Amber. Amber extended a small foot. Joy tripped. I caught her arm and steadied her.

Notice that this version got across the exact same information in terms of what Becky and Rachel looked like and how others perceived them but it tells us nothing about the viewpoint character. Anyone could have described this scene. There's no strong voice here. No unique perspective.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

In order to create strong voices, you have to know your characters inside and out. (See DO #3 above.) Once you know your viewpoint characters, make sure that every bit of action and description you put in your story is filtered through those characters' perspectives. You want to pull your reader into your character's world.

Every single one of us sees the world differently. Our perspectives are what determine what we notice around us and what we hear.

In real life and novels, we can't process every detail in our surroundings. We have to pick and choose. We do this subconsciously, and we do it because of the people we are.

For instance, if I were to walk into a room that has gorgeous furniture, two cute kids, and a fluffy dog, the bulk of my attention is going to be on the fluffy dog because I LOVE dogs. I would notice everything about the dog and probably a little about the furniture because I draw so I tend to notice details of color and shape. The children would be the last thing I'd notice because I'm not as drawn to children as I am to dogs. If someone else, say the mother of small children, was to see the same scene, her personality would cause her to notice the children more than anything else. If another person, someone who couldn't stand kids or dogs, saw the scene, he or she would describe it in a much different tone and focus on different details.

Good novels reveal these sorts of personality aspects about character through character voice, through the way the action and settings are described and through the character's inner thoughts. When you have a strong voice, you never have generic scenes that sound like catalogue descriptions, and you never have rote narrative totally lacking in personality.

A weak voice can break even the most amazing story plot, and a strong voice can lift up even the weakest story plot. Voice carries the story. When you choose an interesting, unique character perspective and you reveal everything in your story through that perspective, you'll have established a strong voice and lifted your manuscript above the vast majority of submissions.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

DON'T #7—Don't put movement in a vacuum

Novels are about people and their actions, right?

So all you have to do to write a novel is create characters and describe what they do and say, right?

Wrong. And wrong.

Novels are more than just people and actions. Novels are worlds. They're places. They're experiences.

In other words, novels don't take place in a vacuum. They take place in settings.

Here's an example of movement taking place in a vacuum:

Sharon ran toward Daniel, her arms extended. He smiled at her, and though he didn't move, she knew he couldn't wait for her to be in his arms.

When they embraced, she clutched at his shoulders.

"Finally," she said.

"It hasn't been as long as it seems," he said.

"It seems like forever." She looked up at him, and he kissed her.

Where are these people? Inside? Outside? What's going on around them?

You don't know, do you? This is a vacuum.

I see a surprisingly large amount of this kind of writing come in from my clients when I first begin working with them. I say surprising because I can't imagine why anyone who has read a novel would think that a story can be told without context.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

One of my clients protested when I told her that she had to bring her scenes to life with description. “Readers are more interested in story than setting,” she told me.

Well, to an extent, she’s right. Few people would want to read a book that’s full of wonderful description but no engaging plot. But the opposite is true too. No matter how intriguing a story is, if it takes place in no-place, it won’t engage readers.

Setting informs plot, and plot informs setting. In other words, in a good novel, the characters’ actions are impacted by what’s going on around them and vice versa.

Let’s look at the above scene again only this time, let’s give it context:

Sharon pushed through the commuter crowd, and ran toward him. Her high heels caught on the train station’s stone floor. She tripped and fell into a tall man smelling of cigarettes and scotch. He scowled at her as she found her balance. She didn’t care about him. She craned her neck to see Daniel as she yanked off her Farragamo pumps and tossed them aside.

Daniel, buffeted by a sea of suits and serious faces, smiled at her. Though he didn’t push off from the tile pillar he leaned against, she knew he couldn’t wait for her to be in his arms.

A train roared into the station just as she reached him. A whistle shrilled. Daniel laughed and pulled her into his arms. She knew why he was laughing. They’d always said that the universe was made just for them, so the train whistle was a celebration of their reunion.

“Finally,” she said. Her mouth was close to his ear, so she knew he heard her even above the din of voices and train engines.

“It hasn’t been as long as it seems.” His breath was warm against her ear. Someone jabbed her with an umbrella, and she couldn’t have cared less.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

“It seems like forever.” She looked up at him, and he kissed her.

A voice over the loudspeaker announced, “Keep belongings close at all times. Baggage left unattended will be confiscated.”

As her mouth merged with his, she knew that was what she must do—keep him close. She couldn’t afford to be away from him again. She might lose him if she was.

In this version of the scene, we have some context. Notice how the context impacts the plot. The stone floor catches on her expensive shoes, and she throws the shoes away. This shows the urgency of Sharon’s need to be with Daniel. The train whistle sounds, and their reaction to it reveals the intimacy of their relationship. The loudspeaker voice and Sharon’s reaction to that creates a story question. Why would she lose him if she’s away from her again? (I mentioned story questions in DO #2 above, and I discuss the importance of story questions in detail in [Novel Writing Made Easy](#).)

If you don’t bring the settings in your manuscript to life, your characters and their actions lose richness and real presence. A manuscript that has action in a vacuum will get rejected so fast you’ll feel like you got sucked into that same vacuum yourself.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

DO #7—Do create pop-off-the page settings

If you want your readers to be fully engaged in your story, you must draw them into your novel's world. You do this by bringing the settings to life, by using as much sensory detail as possible.

We have five physical senses—sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. Great settings engage all five of these senses. Using these senses is like a magic spell that plucks your reader from wherever he or she is sitting and puts him or her right in the action of your story.

Here's an example of sensory detail from my novel, *Alternate Beauty*:

Breathing heavily, I pushed the fleshy side of my thumb against the Tupperware lid's edge. My bright red polish looked stark against the clear plastic. I grimaced, struggled, and finally popped off the lid. Grasping the container in one hand, I yanked open a drawer to grab a fork with the other. The silverware clattered—a comforting jangle of metal against metal.

I attacked the lasagna, cold and congealed. As I cut through limp, pale pasta and rubbery white cheese, red sauce smelling of oregano oozed from between the layers and a chunk of sausage about the size of the end of my index finger shot out and hit the side of the container. I recoiled. For an instant, I considered tossing the whole thing down the disposal or at least sticking it in the microwave to warm it up so it looked more appetizing. I stared at the cylindrical chunk of sausage. Fat shimmered over its surface.

Notice how this passage activates all the senses. You can see what's going on. You can hear it (metal jangling). You can imagine touching it because of the texture descriptions (congealed, rubbery). You can smell it. You can taste it ... in your imagination anyway.

Obviously, not all scenes will lend themselves to all senses, but as a general rule, you can always activate at least two of the five senses in any situation. And you must. Most beginning writers tend to get stuck on the sense of sight. They describe how things look but they forget

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

the other senses. Getting all of your reader's senses involved captivates your reader. A captivated reader can't put your book down.

The trick to creating sensory-rich settings is the use of specific nouns with adjectives and well-chosen verbs, sometimes with adverbs. In the example above, notice that I used the word Tupperware, not just container. Lasagna, white cheese, sausage. These are all specific nouns. I didn't just say leftover Italian food.

I used the same specificity in verb choice: grimaced, yanked, attacked, recoiled. These verbs bring the scene to life, showing the character's emotional reactions to the action.

My [*Novel Writing Made Easy System*](#) has detailed discussions of how to choose words that create this sensory detail and how to do the research necessary to bring many scenes to life. The audios in the system also teach you how to create this kind of sensory detail in your settings by getting you in the habit of becoming aware of your senses in all aspects of your daily life.

If you want to impress an agent or editor, you must learn to write settings that seem so real your reader feels like he or she can step right into them and be there with your characters.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

DON'T #8—Don't let your manuscript dribble to an end

Have you ever read a book, gotten to the end, and flipped the page wondering where the rest of the story was?

Stories, be they on paper or film, that leave you feeling unfinished are extremely annoying. "That was a waste of time," people say in disgust when they reach the end of a book that fizzles.

"I liked it until I got to the end," my husband often says about books or movies.

So what is a dribbly end to a novel?

Novels dribble to an end when they do one of three things:

1. They don't fully resolve the character's problems. Bad novels leave story lines dangling. They raise questions that are never answered.
2. They attempt to resolve story lines but they do it in an unbelievable or incomplete way or they do it in a way that makes the characters act in ways they never would act.
3. They bring the story to a close in such a predictable fashion that the reader feels like he or she shouldn't have bothered to read it. Readers like surprises and revelations at the end of a story. If your plot leads inexorably to one obvious conclusion, you have a dribbling ending.

You must be sure that all of your plot lines are tied up at the end in a way that your reader couldn't predict with certainty. They don't have to be tied up in a happy way, but they do have to be resolved one way or the other. The character must win or lose on all the layers of the story.

And all of these resolutions mustn't be transparent. Readers don't want to know everything before the last page of the book. A dribbling ending is like a gift that isn't wrapped. You see too much too soon.

Even if you've avoided all the other don'ts and achieved all the other dos listed in this e-book, you can still lose an agent's or editor's interest if your novel dribbles to an end. Be sure you end strong.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

DO #8—Do give your story a satisfying resolution

Everything in a novel leads up to the all important ending. That ending must deliver. What does it need to deliver? Satisfaction. Your reader must feel like the story is finished, and it's finished in a way that makes sense.

A satisfying ending meets these three criteria:

1. A good ending resolves all problems (main plot conflict and subplot conflicts) that come up in the course of the story. Note that resolve doesn't mean fix. Your characters can solve their problems, but they can also be beaten by the problems.

You can also, at least for some minor subplots, leave problems ongoing. But if you do this, you have to explain why they're ongoing and what would need to happen in the future for the problem to be resolved. This technique is often used in novel series where the immediate problem is solved in the novel, but the bigger problem is ongoing. For example, in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, Harry solves the focal conflict of each book, but until the last book of the series, the big problem—how to defeat Voldemort—remains.

2. A good ending resolves the problems in a way that is believable. It's extraordinarily dissatisfying when a story has an outrageous, totally not credible ending.

Believable endings have two essential qualities: they keep the characters in character and they fit the story events.

Characters must stay in character, but this doesn't mean they can't change. It just means that their changes are organic—they grow naturally out of story events.

A story about a pacifist who is depicted throughout a novel as a person who would under no circumstances do violence can't pull out a gun and shoot the bad guy at the end. It would be out of character and therefore outrageous and unsatisfying. The only way to make such an ending believable is to show how the pacifist grows and changes in such a way that his shift to violence makes sense.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

Story endings must also match the story. If, for example, in Freddy's story, he manages to save his family because he sprouts wings and flies, the ending is outrageous. Freddy's story up to this point has been a straight action adventure. It can't suddenly turn into fantasy. Events must fall into place and seem to belong.

The way to create a strange ending is to pave the way for it. You do this by using foreshadowing. For instance, if Freddy really does need to fly to end his story, you need to create scenes in the story that let the reader know this isn't an ordinary action story. Unusual things must happen early on. And at least one or more scenes earlier on in the story need to suggest that Freddy might have unusual abilities such as flying.

Good endings make sense. They can, and should be, surprising, but they still need to be a logical unfolding of the story events.

3. A good ending tells the reader something he or she didn't know or hasn't figured out. Satisfying endings answer questions that haven't yet been answered.

If you've answered all story questions before the end of the book, the end will be unsatisfying. It will feel like a let down.

Good novel endings aren't just stopping points. They're revelations. At the end of a good book, the events must be resolved in an unexpected way or the main character must gain some unexpected insight.

You want to leave your reader with an "aha" feeling. Give them the satisfaction of "finding out what's behind curtain number three."

Keep in mind that the ending doesn't mean the last page of your novel. The ending of the book can start 50 pages before the last page. The ending is the culmination. After the culmination, you can often take a few pages to tie up loose ends in a way that's reasonably predictable. As long as your reader had that "so that's what was going on" moment, he or she will hang with you and feel satisfied when you "put away the toys" on the last few pages.

If you go to all the trouble to write a great manuscript, be sure you take it to a great ending. Leave your readers satisfied but wanting more ... more of your work in the future.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

Conclusion

So there you have it—The Sweet Sixteen. If you avoid the eight don'ts I talk about in this e-book and you pull off the eight dos, you'll have a manuscript that will impress agents and editors. You'll be on the way to being a published author.

[*The Novel Writing Made Easy System*](#) is designed to teach you what you need to know to avoid the don'ts and achieve the dos in this e-book. It teaches what you must know to write a novel that will sell. It gives you the information you need AND it leads you through the exercises that allow you to turn that information into proficiency.

I want you to enjoy the thrill of seeing your novel in bookstores. I want you to have the satisfaction of signing books and being on national TV. I want you to achieve your dream.

So learn what you need to learn and practice, practice, practice your writing. And let me know when your book hits the shelves.

Feel free to share this e-book with others. You may copy it and distribute it as often as you want as long as you don't change the content.

If you would like to earn 50 percent affiliate commissions on [*The Novel Writing Made Easy System*](#), [contact me](#) via <http://andewaggener.com> and give me your clickbank ID. I will put your clickbank ID into all the *Novel Writing Made Easy* links in this e-book and make a PDF you can give away to subscribers or website visitors.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.

About The Author

I am the author of both fiction and nonfiction. My books include *Healthy, Wealthy, & Wise—52 Life-changing Lessons for the 21st Century* (Hazelden 2005), a self help book that teaches people how to develop inner qualities that pave the way for a quality life; *Alternate Beauty* (Bantam 2005), a novel about an obese women who wakes up in a universe where fat is considered beautiful; and *Dog Parenting—How to Have an Outrageously Happy, Well-adjusted Canine* (Adams Media Corp. 2006), a lighthearted look at how to give a dog great dog care. I am a former newspaper columnist, and I've had numerous short stories, poems, and essays published in magazines.

A former attorney and now author, writing coach, and blogger, I have given workshops and personal instruction to both beginning and advanced writing students. I've been a guest on numerous radio programs. My books have been featured in newspapers such as the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* and in national magazines like *Shape Magazine*, and I've been a guest on FOX News Network's, *Fox and Friends*, as well as on the Pacific Northwest, ABC TV's *Northwest Afternoon*.

My *Novel Writing Made Easy System* is available at <http://www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com>).

I blog at

<http://andewaggener.com>
<http://thesecretiswags.com>
<http://thejoyfulspringer.com>

I live in Washington State, on the coast, with my husband Tim and my dog, Ducky, the star of [The Joyful Springer](http://thejoyfulspringer.com).

Legal Notice

While I have attempted to verify all information provided in this e-book, I do not assume any responsibility for errors, omissions, or contradictory information contained in this book.

This book is not intended as career or financial advice. The purchaser or reader of this e-book assumes all responsibility for the use of any of the ideas or information presented in this e-book. I assume no responsibility or liability whatsoever for any actions the purchaser or reader takes because of this e-book. I provide no guarantees or warranty that by following the advice in this e-book, you will complete and sell a novel. Individual results may vary. Please use due diligence to determine the effectiveness of all advice given before you apply it.

Stop dreaming and start doing. Find everything you need to know to get your novel sold at www.novelwritingmadeeasy.com.