

HOW TO SELL MORE BOOKS AT VIRTUAL READINGS

The *Writer*

Imagine • Write • Publish

FEBRUARY 2021

75

WRITING PROMPTS

*to keep your creativity
flowing all winter long!*

+

**Helpful strategies to
keep you writing**
(even when you feel
hopelessly stuck)

**10 common
romance tropes**
(plus how-to tips from
your favorite pros)

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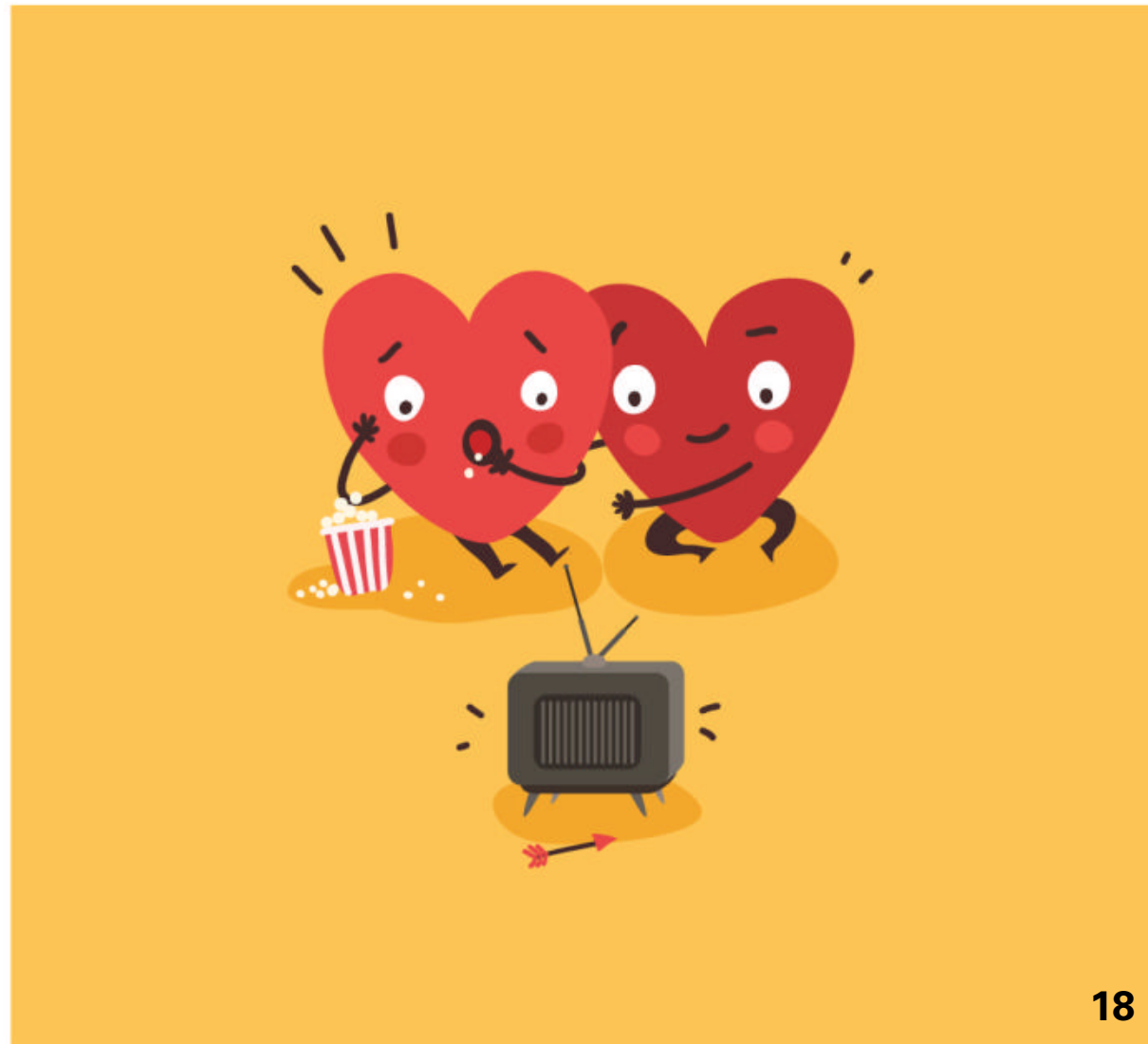
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Charting joy

One of my favorite ways to deal with a problem is to bury it in the darkest corner of my mind and try to forget it exists.

Hey, I didn't say best. I said *favorite*.

Because it's certainly the coping strategy my mind reaches for first when presented with a dilemma. Sadly, burying seed woes does not a solution tree make, and sooner or later, I need to stop avoiding eye contact with whatever's causing my anxiety.

The issue, I think, is that my brain likes to convince itself that the problem is too big, too menacing, too complicated for my tiny self to face. This is a lie, plain and simple, and all it usually takes to confront that invented nonsense is to break out my favorite pen and put the problem on paper. Because the problem isn't too large for me to solve; I just need to sit down and think about it. And the pen, the paper, the words – these are my means to the thinking end. It turns an intangible struggle into every writer's familiar riddle: I have just 26 letters to make my way from Thought A to Thought B. I just need to find the right words to make the leap.

Recently, though, when plagued with an unusually large pile of stressors in the throes of a pandemic, I started to wonder why I only brought out my trusty pen and paper for sorrow

and never for the positives. Was I inadvertently conditioning myself that pen and paper were only to be used when I was feeling low, anxious, or hopelessly confused? Why shouldn't I use those same letters to skip from Happy Thought A to Happy Thought B, recording tiny marvels and brainstorming ways to reap more pleasure from life in lockdown?

So this winter, my personal goal is to chart every delight that comes my way. When I finish a book so pleasant I want to hug it to my chest, I break out my journal. I try to sort out why, exactly, it lit up my pleasure receptors and seek out books that hint they might deliver the same. When a friend's story or joke makes me laugh, I write it down. A new recipe comes out perfect, a show is such a treat I burn through it in a single weekend, or a friend's Zoom concert is a virtual triumph – I put all of them on paper. Writing it down makes the soaring in my chest feel more real, more long-lasting. I'm free to reread all these past flutters of joy any time I'm feeling down, preserving them for a future self that might need them.

Writing about woe makes it feel more tangible, solvable, real, achievable. In a very dark, long winter, I'm learning writing about rapture does the same.

Keep writing,

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This month on writermag.com



A new year of contests approaches

We're busy getting ready for our 2021 contest season, and we know it's going to be an exciting one. Bookmark writermag.com/contests now so you never miss a writing competition.

In love with love

February's the perfect time to celebrate romance. Join us on our blog as we round up Valentine's Day writing prompts, share our favorite rom-coms, and collect pro tips from bestselling romance authors.

School's back in session for our members

Are you a member of *The Writer* yet? In addition to getting access to our back library and receiving free contest entries (plus an abundance of other benefits), you'll also get FREE access to our member-only webinars with our editorial staff and other special guests. Visit writermag.com/memberships to sign up today.

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In memory of Susan Fitzgerald, COO, 1966-2018

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STAYING ORGANIZED

A new year and a long winter offer plenty of opportunities to get our craft and career ducks in a row. These products will help you defeat both physical and mental clutter, clearing a creative path forward all year long.



1



2



3



PLANNING TOOLS

1. THE WRITER'S PLANNER

This coil-bound, undated planner is designed specifically for novel writers, featuring dedicated sections for character development, writing goals, world mapping, and story structure, among others. It also contains tracking pages for word count, expenses, income, submissions, and mood/sleep.

\$28.95, laurakinker.com

2. DOWNLOADABLE BOOK RELEASE PLAN

Create a custom timeline for each book you release into the world with these downloadable planning sheets, offering spaces to schedule everything from final plotting and editing to sending out ARCs and designing countdown-to-launch graphics.

\$6.99, etsy.com/shop/ohsonovel

3. READ HARDER BOOK TRACKER

This reading log, created by Book Riot, allows you to jot down each title you read this year, along with space to leave your impressions and reviews. The book also contains reading challenges to expand your bookish horizons, such as "read a book that was originally published in another language" or "read a book about books," complete with recommended titles that suit each category.

\$16.99, barnesandnoble.com



5



4



ORGANIZERS

4. THE WRITING BOX

Inspired by a portable writing desk that Thomas Jefferson designed in 1776 and used for 50 years, this leather-lined wooden box boasts plenty of elastic pockets to keep all your pens and notebooks secured while also offering a sturdy surface to write upon when closed.

\$149, galenleather.com

5. THE VAULT

If you like the idea of a portable productivity station but need more structure and compartments, The Vault may fit the bill nicely. Two miniature drawers and a miniature filing caddy occupy one side of this all-in-one desk organizer, while a larger caddy for standard files and other documents occupies the other side.

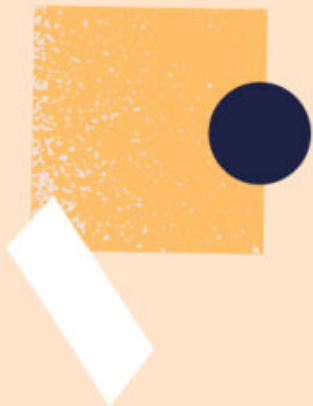
\$49.95, savor.us

6. ESSENTIAL OFFICE SET

Available in black, white, or gray, this three-piece wall office set comes with a dry-erase magnetic monthly calendar, a letter file bin, and an organizer with a shelf, caddy, and three hanging hooks.

\$229, potterybarn.com

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7



CALENDARS

7. Q&A EVERY DAY CALENDAR

This colorful desktop calendar allows writers to begin each day with a new prompt, with questions ranging from “Where is your favorite place to escape to?” to “Would you rather only be able to whisper or only be able to shout?”

\$14.79, [target.com](https://www.target.com)

8. LITERARY DESK CALENDAR

Each new month of this illustrated calendar features a quote from an author or fictional character coupled with a brightly colored drawing, all set to perch on a wooden stand that’s included with each purchase. An all-Jane Austen calendar is also available from the same artist.

\$24.99, www.etsy.com/shop/shoplucyinthesky

If you’d prefer a smaller, monochromatic version of a literary desk calendar that still combines author quotes with illustrations, this cardstock option may be the perfect addition to your writing workspace in 2021. A wooden base is also available to purchase for an additional \$8.

\$20, [etsy.com/shop/echoliteraryarts](https://www.etsy.com/shop/echoliteraryarts)

9. YEAR-AT-A-GLANCE CALENDAR

The sleek design of this annual calendar features vintage typewriter designs and comes in four different sizes as well as color schemes.

Starts at \$13.79, [etsy.com/shop/inkedpatentprints](https://www.etsy.com/shop/inkedpatentprints)

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8



* “The relationship between reader and writer is reciprocal in a way. We co-create each other. We are constantly emerging out of the relationship we have with others.” —Ruth Ozeki

TIPS FOR STAYING ORGANIZED ALL YEAR LONG

1 Carve out a time each week for organizational admin work. Which task on your plate is the quickest to spiral out of control? Book-keeping? Email? Reclaiming your workspace after a long day of research? Schedule a regular maintenance session to keep up with the accumulation. Even if it's just a 15-minute window every Friday where you clear your desk of all the clutter that's accumulated throughout the workweek, you'll avoid becoming overwhelmed if you have a dedicated regular appointment on the calendar to help you stay organized.

2 Choose dedicated places to store important items – and utilize them. Losing things wastes time and energy and leaves us feel hopelessly frustrated. Start by making a list of 10 items in your workspace that are essential to your craft and career – and preferably ones that don't already have a set resting place in a folder, drawer, or desktop corner. Where can you find good, safe homes for these items? If you've struggled to find spots for them in the past, what do you think was impractical about that prior home? Is it an item that gets used a lot and needs to be within arm's reach, or is it an item that you utilize

infrequently enough that it got buried by other things? If you're out of shelf, drawer, and desk space, are there organizational products (folders, filing cabinets, hanging shelves) you can purchase to help make more room? Alternatively, what's taking up room in your workspace that you can find a home for elsewhere?

3 Don't neglect your digital files, either. Think of your computer as an entire room of its own. Is it organized to your liking? How long does it typically take you to find something? Scheduling computer clean-up sessions a few times a year will help prevent clutter from accruing in your desktop, documents, email, and other key digital locations. (And once everything's to your liking, be sure to back up your data so these newly organized files won't be lost forever in a crash.)

4 Try to accomplish tasks in batches. Instead of scheduling book promotion social media posts every day, schedule an entire week's worth at a time. Send out a round of follow-up emails instead of firing off one or two when you think of them. Fill out multiple invoices at once since you already have the template open. This won't just save time and preserve focus as you switch from one task to another; it'll also be one less thing on your to-do list to forget later in the week.

5 Forgo boring spreadsheets and tracking documents. Writers are wonderfully creative. Why shouldn't your organizational tools match? Embrace colored cells or eye-catching fonts as you set up your submission tracker. Purchase a beautiful notebook to log your hours in. Use the good pens for everyday note-taking. If there's anything you can think of to make organization feel more pleasant and less like drudgery, you should absolutely take advantage of it.



Fall off the log

A little shift in consciousness can create life-altering creativity.

As I write this, we're on the eve of an important election here in the United States. I've done very little today, and I think tomorrow may be a wash as well. These are the kinds of days when it is super hard to concentrate. But these are also the kinds of days when it's most important to concentrate. During times like these, retreating into the world we're crafting, the memory we're trying to resurrect, the sense we're trying to make of our runaway imaginations can be the thing that keeps us healthy.

And so today, I want to talk to you about my single greatest tip for moving forward:

Just.

Start.

Oh, hey, lady, you're thinking right about now, thanks for a whole lot of nuttin'! And you'd be right. It's super easy for any of us to say "just start," but how realistic is it when you can't even corral yourself to sit at your desk for more than three minutes before you feel the need to get up and burn off some nervous energy or before you feel the desire to do some housework instead of wrestling with a difficult character. (Ironing, by the way, is very satisfying. Poof! Wrinkles gone. If only we could do that with our plot problems.) As with anything, there are tips and tricks to get around it. Writer Anne Lamott, in her classic *Bird By Bird*, reveals that she puts a 1-inch frame somewhere on her desk. When she sits down to write, she tells herself, "All you have to do is write enough to fill that 1-inch frame."

Me? I have a bright pink Post-it note



stuck to the bottom left-hand corner of my monitor. In block letters, it reads, "Just. Start." And there's another trick in my computer. I have an app called SelfControl. It blacklists certain websites (all my social accounts; all of my email clients) for a certain time period, so I really have no excuse but to work in my word processing program or do research. I can set it for as few as 15 minutes or for as long as a day. Usually, I set it for 45 minutes, which is about as long as I can work for before I need to get up and stretch or look at something else.

This little tool is handy for another reason: It prevents the decision fatigue I sometimes suffer when it comes to something like checking email or social media. When I know I'm meant to be working on something I care about, something that will take work, I incur a certain amount of guilt when I start to open up my email client or go to type in "Instagram.com." But with something like a blacklist, that decision is taken away from me entirely: It's not an option. So, I don't even have to think about either feeling guilty or making the decision to click or not to click. It

sounds like a small thing, but once you've experienced it, you'll know.

Speaking of time, there's always the trusty Pomodoro method, where you set a timer for 25 to 30 minutes and then take a two- to three-minute break. Invented in the 1980s by Francesco Cirillo, a management expert, and named for the tomato-shaped timer he used, it also calls for a longer break once you've completed four or five work rounds. People in the know say it works because you get a reward – the break – at the end of each work session. And the short break isn't long enough for you to get too distracted by something else.

There's another thing you can do to make just starting easier, and it has to do with reducing the friction of any one task. When I say "friction," I mean resistance. If it's harder for you to do something, you're less likely to do it, right? This is what people mean when they say things like, "It's as easy as falling off a log." When I hear this expression, I don't just think about a log in the woods somewhere; I think about a log in one of those log-rolling competitions, where there's nothing but slick water all the way around. You almost can't help but fall off that log, can you? Our job is to make just starting as easy as falling off a log into a river.

While management expert Laszlo Bock was the head of human resources at Google, he put into place some initiatives that made it possible for Googlers to eat more healthily. How did he do this? He put unhealthy snacks in opaque containers and healthy snacks in clear containers. When Googlers couldn't see the unhealthy snacks, they naturally went for the healthy ones, which they could see. It was as easy as falling off a log. Bock based this decision on economist Richard Thaler's work around choice architecture, and it can be seen in other workplaces, too. Some companies, for instance, place their bathrooms strategically so that

you're forced to *pass through* areas like the kitchen or other communal areas. You're then nearly always bumping into someone from another department on your way to or from the bathroom, and you might have more constructive interactions because of it.

I've been thinking about something a friend said to me when I lamented that it had been many moons since I had done anything that was creative and voluntary. Everything I was writing was for assignment, and it had been a long time since I had done anything for the sheer pleasure of making

During times like these, retreating into the world we're crafting, the memory we're trying to resurrect, the sense we're trying to make of our runaway imaginations can be the thing that keeps us healthy.

something new. "Surely," my friend countered, "this is when you get out your paintbrushes."

In her comment, I thought, was the problem. There was still plenty of capacity for me to enjoy something like watercolor, which is an art I have dabbled in for some time. I am still new enough at it to make joyful mistakes; I still enjoy pushing myself. But she had said, "This is when you *get out* your paintbrushes," and that's when I recalled Bock's food containers.

My painting tools are always out of the way, put away on shelves or in cabinets. When I go to paint, I have to make a deliberate decision to do so. "I am going to paint now," I say to myself – truly! – and although no one will argue that setting an intention is a very good

thing, one could also argue that the intention is pointless if you then encounter friction strong enough to stop you from doing a thing.

I made a change: I carved out a little corner for myself. I put a drafting desk in that corner, and I leave my paints, drawing and painting implements, and paper out on that desk *all the time*. I do not put them away because then I would have to take them out again, and that extra step would create just enough friction that I probably wouldn't do the watercoloring. And then I *definitely* wouldn't reap the enjoyment I get.

Remember how we talked about how the break in the Pomodoro routine was its own little reward?

Well, I want to tell you something. The enjoyment you get from spending some time in the writing world or in the fictional world that you've created for your work in progress or with the characters that populate your memoir, that feels like a reward in and of itself. The satisfaction you get from knowing that you completed a couple of paragraphs, or just enough to fill a 1-inch frame, count that as a reward, too.

Tinkering with words; spreading some knowledge about what you've learned; discussing writing, after a fashion, with other writers – even that's a kind of reward.

I know this to be true because for the first time all day – we are at the end of the workday here in California – I have completed something: I have finished writing this column. And after those first few rocky minutes, the sheer joy of writing and of passing on what I know to you has carried me through to the end of this task. This is my reward.

Now, it's your turn: Just. Start. 📖

Yi Shun Lai is the author of *Pin Ups*, a memoir. She teaches in the MFA programs at Bay Path and Southern New Hampshire universities and is a founding editor of *Undomesticated Magazine*. Visit at undomesticatedmag.com.



THE FINAL SPELLCHECK

The larger the manuscript, the more prone it is to errors.

This checklist will ensure those i's are dotted,
the t's are crossed, and your protagonist's name is
spelled the same the whole way through.

(Trust us: The latter is way more common than you think.)

BY TIMONS ESAIAS





IT should go without saying that any manuscript that we submit for publication should be so free of sin and error that it will go straight to heaven the very second that the end comes. Perfection should be baseline. Or, at least, near-perfection.

I work with a lot of different manuscripts (my own, my students', my professional clients' and colleagues') and, frankly, most of them are a mess. They have allegedly been spellchecked and proofread, but we all know that the hand that makes the error is connected to the eye that can't see it. Likewise, the computer that didn't detect the error in the first place won't find it later.

A fundamental problem these days is that we've all become dependent on our software to catch mistakes, and the software isn't really up to the job of correcting *all* the mistakes in fiction manuscripts; only a human eye (preferably not your own) can do that. The software is very vigilant, however, and magnificent in its own way. This list will attempt to teach you how to harness that vigilance to your own benefit.



THE PRELIMINARIES

First, let's make sure you're actually ready for a spellcheck. If you are working on a book or something with chapters or sidebars, you can't effectively spellcheck unless it's all in one file. It has to be one document. Don't kid yourself about this. One file.

So, here's the preliminary checklist:

- Stitch whatever you're working on into a single document file.
- Turn Widow/Orphan control OFF for the whole document.
- Make sure it's all in one font, unless you have a very specific need for more than one. (If you select the whole text and the font name disappears from the font identifier dropdown, you know you've got font issues to correct. It won't look very professional to see you randomly switch from Times New Roman to Calibri in the middle of a chapter.)
- Check to make sure it has just one kind of spacing in the text (all double-spaced, for example, or all single-spaced).
- Check to make sure the margins are the same throughout, not 1 inch for a while and then 1-and-two-bits elsewhere.
- Check that your spellchecking software is set to catch words with punctuation in the middle or numbers. Does it ignore *Fred8erica*, or "Hey,"*She said*? That's a blind spot that must be corrected.

Oh, yeah, and there are two more steps, one of them tedious but which I'm finding increasingly necessary these days:

- Now that we're back to single spaces between sentences (and if you haven't switched, you should; much easier to be consistent with single spaces), you need to do a search for two spaces in a row. And replace all with single spaces.
- For some reason, unclear to me, I'm finding blank spaces at the beginnings of paragraphs, regardless of whether they're auto-indented or tabbed. To seek out this error I know of no procedure other than to click the pilcrow (¶) ON (which reveals all the formatting symbols) and look at every single paragraph indentation.

THE PROCEDURE

Let me be a bit harsh because I've dealt with the bad outcomes. Do not attempt to do final edits on your phone or your tablet. Yes, you can write on them; yes, you can do minor edits on them; yes, you can do low-grade proofing on them. But people who try to do *final* edits on phones or tablets are foolish.

There. I said it.

Materials: You will need your computer and your file, of course, but you will also need a legal pad and a writing utensil. (Some folks use a second computer or a second monitor so they can automatically alphabetize the list, and I can see that.)

Let's begin:

- A very common proofreading error is to ignore titles and headers because you think you'd never misspell your own name or your title. But it happens. So, carefully check those.
- Begin the spellcheck at the very start of the text.
- When the first item comes up, decide whether it's an actual error. Then you have two choices:
 - If it's an error, correct it immediately.
 - If it's NOT an error (like a name you invented or a neologism you're using or slang), first, check to make sure the word is spelled as you would like it, and then **write the word down on your legal pad** so you know you've dealt with this. And then and *only* then may you hit "Ignore All."
- If you are checking a novel, you might want to have columns on your pad for Names, for Places, and for Words. Trust me.





We look at the error that spellcheck finds, we don't see a problem, or don't remember an inconsistency, and we blithely hit "Ignore All." I have known that simple act to embed hundreds of individual mistakes in a manuscript, all with a single click.

- Each time your spellchecker flags an error, first review your list to see if you already dealt with this issue. This is where you will discover that you spelled your protagonist's name differently. (I have seen manuscripts in which a single character's name was spelled – I am not kidding – five or more different ways.)
- The spellchecker should flag the possessive form of a name or word that's already down on your list. Again, you need to note that on your list before hitting "Ignore All." Why? Because you might have spelled the possessive two different ways, and this way you'll catch it.
- The spellchecker should flag the plural form of a name or word that's already down on the list. Again, you need to write that down before hitting Ignore All.
- **Never, ever accidentally hit "Ignore All" on an error.** Proceeding slowly and steadily through the document is the only way to go when spellchecking.
- If you run into a compound word that the spellchecker dictionary doesn't know – for example, *moonglow* – make a note to check for *moon glow* and *moon-glow* at the end of this procedure; this will ensure you haven't spelled the word different ways throughout the document. Likewise, if you want to spell *gray* as *grey* (which is really British English), make a note to search for both at the end to make sure you're consistent.
- When the spellchecker reaches the end of the text, it's time to do the follow-ups on notes you may have written along the way: the compounds, the idiosyncratic choices for spelling, whatever.
- Finally, if you have trouble with certain homonyms, it's best to do a search on each one and double-check. (I, alas, am a homonym-substituter. I know them apart perfectly well, but you would never know that from how my fingers type them.)



Why is all this necessary? Because we tend to get lazy when doing a lengthy spellcheck on the screen alone. We look at the error that spellcheck finds, we don't see a problem, or don't remember an inconsistency, and we blithely hit "Ignore All." I have known that simple act to embed hundreds of individual mistakes in a manuscript, all with a single click.

Will this catch everything? Sadly, no. Wrong words will get by. Place names you looked up on the internet, rather than an actual reference work, will be wrong. The email to your boss that you pasted into the wrong file – this file, right in the middle of the scene where Mary breaks the bad news to Brad – will still be there.

But this procedure will reduce the number of unforced errors in your game. The manuscript will be better. Better is the way forward. 📖

Timons Esaias is a satirist, writer, and poet living in Pittsburgh. His works, ranging from literary to genre, have been published in 20 languages. He teaches at Seton Hill University in the Writing Popular Fiction MFA Program. He has won the Louis and the Asimov's Readers' Awards.

SETTING



TABLE



A table of contents isn't just about organizing your chapters; it's also a valuable tool for shaping your novel's content. Here's how to use it to its fullest potential.

BY ALISON ACHESON

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A table of contents is an odd little thing: usually forgotten in the heat of creating a first draft but so useful to focus, shape, and pace later drafts. At some point during the second draft – possibly a “blocked” day, when a manuscript’s progression stalls – it’s quite useful to set up your novel’s table, where an author works through chapter titles and lengths and gains the sense of through-line that comes with this knowledge. Here’s an example for a working table of contents for *Feenie Bailey and the Dog Days Mystery*, a middle grade novel.

CHAPTER #	TITLE	FALLS ON PAGE	TOTAL PAGES IN CHAPTER
1	Look What the Storm Dragged In	1	10
2	Number 3 Boat	11	14
3	Last of the Cookies	25	14
4	Lost & Found	39	9
5	Fedora Bacon	48	13
6	Felicity Merry Has A Clue	61	8
7	Cowbell Alarm	69	11
8	Red Canoe and a Padlock	80	14
9	Lots of Sparkly Breathing	94	12
10	Turning the Bicycle Shed	106	5
11	Just a Hunch	111	10
12	The Last Place	121	19
13	Scary White	140	10
14	One-eyed Jack	150	10
15	Stakeout	160	13
16	Bearing Gifts	173	15
17	And In the End	188	5

Table of contents for *Feenie Bailey and the Dog Days Mystery*

Titling chapters

First things first: It's time to name the chapters in your draft. When it comes to titling chapters, the idea is to come up with *something*. This is a working table of contents (TOC), which means there's plenty of room for the author to play. Some titles may come to you easily, and some will be a struggle. Think in terms of focus if you are struggling. *What is the chapter about? What happens in this section?* The answer to this question will give the chapter a sense of urgency and, as a result, movement. It'll also easily point out segments in need of revision. If you are unable to articulate what happens in a given chapter, it's probably a sign that this section has not yet found its shape – or beginning, middle, and end. Once you've pinpointed the focus, then you may pencil in a short descriptor of the action that occurs or opt for something more whimsical. Look through the example titles to see how they have a sense of “opener,” “closer,” a certain coyness or “messaging-with-you,” something that elicits question. Ideally you want a good variety and for them to have a rhythm all their own but analogous to the rhythm of the novel story, too.

The trick in using a TOC to its maximum novel-shaping potential is to select a title for every chapter, even if you plan on removing them before you send the manuscript out to the world. Many novels for adults have no TOC and only numbered chapters; you may not feel a great need to create a table of contents. But it is an excellent way to spot plot holes and bumps in pacing, so even if just for early drafts, do try to keep a table much like the one included here.

If you seek permanent chapter names, however, you may find a title buried within the chapter words you have already written. Review with a title-seeking lens over your eyes. Something will pop out, and when it does, ask yourself why that particular phrase has waved at you. Sometimes it is so obvious: the phrase may be on point, even too much so. Other times, it might be a note of whimsy or a turn of phrase that piques the reader's interest. Note the chapters in the example titled “Fedora Bacon,” “Cow Alarm,” and “Lots of Sparkly Breathing.” These are hardly words you'd expect to be strung together. For the reader, the reward will come with connecting these seemingly random words to what they experience as

If you are unable to articulate what happens in a given chapter, it's probably a sign that this section has not yet found its shape – or beginning, middle, and end.

the story progresses, allowing for a small *a-ha* moment as the story unfolds. The words may bring some inner smile to the reader.

Skeletal outlines

Try reading the TOCs of a number of published books that have full chapter titles. (Granted, the titles may not be listed in a TOC in some novels, so you may have to copy them out to read them all together in a list format.) This list of chapters usually forms a microcosm of the work. You can see the skeletal framework of the story unfold as each chapter progresses. You'll notice there will be a sense of narrative pacing as well, just in the titles alone.

In our example TOC, the opening title (“Look What the Storm Dragged In”) has an introductory feel to it. It also elicits curiosity: What did the cat...er, *storm*...drag in? It draws in the reader for the setup. The final chapter, on the other hand, is rather bluntly handled, with “And in the End” – but, in its defense, those words are drawn verbatim from the closing chapter. And you nearly always do want a story to create a sense of closure. (Obviously, you can rethink how you might conclude a more experimentally written novel. I have deliberately chosen a middle grade novel to simplify and illustrate a TOC's usefulness). Since this particular story is a mystery novel, you'll notice

some of the titles are chosen to elicit just that – a sense of mystery. Obviously, a TOC’s feel will change depending on the book’s genre: humor books will have funnier chapter titles than, say, a gripping suspense, while horror chapters will be much more ominous than a witty rom-com.

Now for the numbers

The four columns in your working TOC include each chapter’s number, title, the page on which it begins, and – significant for pacing – the number of pages in each one. (You might add another column for notes on the content, if you find that helpful.) This last column is particularly significant when working through later drafts, when you’re trying to determine the pacing of the story. Note how there is a rhythm to the varying lengths. “Ten pages” is often touted as the ideal number of pages for a novel for young people, with almost double that ideal for adult work. Here, the opening chapter is exactly ten, and the following chapter, in which the story is building, is longer.


Longer chapters
allow a reader to
“settle into” the
work, and shorter
chapters increase
the pace.

Of course, each story is different. You may have a solid reason for a longer or short second chapter. But seeing these numbers in front of you can help you be mindful of the process. It’s easy to see where a scene might have ballooned out of control if one particular chapter is 12 pages longer than any other, for example, or where a chapter might need a few more scenes to flesh it out if it’s falling much shorter than any of the others. Looking at the page counts can quickly indicate where you need to rewrite or cut.

Generally, longer chapters allow a reader to “settle into” the work, and shorter chapters increase the pace. In a mystery novel (or in any novel in which you want to create tension), those short chapters allow you to move quickly, pivoting from story point to story point and increasing the tension as you near the climax of the story. You’ll note that chapter 12 in our example TOC has a whopping 19 pages, and this is by design: Often in a mystery (and in many other genres), there will be a longer chapter around the two-thirds mark. At that point, the story is about to burst wide open, and that point can be quite intense; the reader’s attention is laser-focused on the heart-racing plot, and it is not a good time to break that. Wherever this point hits in your story, you want to hold, hold, hold with a longer chapter...and *then* finally break it with a chapter ending. In this case, chapter 13 returns to a 10-page format, and then it again ramps up to longer and closes with a short one.

Note also the timing of the shorter – less-than-10-page – chapters throughout. This is also by design. The two instances of very short chapters are just past the halfway point (that will serve to wake up the reader and prevent monotony), and, to close, the denouement, to wrap things up succinctly.

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Each draft of a novel requires a different approach: an openness and expansiveness for first drafts (just getting it all on the page); a general honing-in for second; scrutinizing various threads and elements on their own in later drafts; then analyzing how such threads work together... and, of course, after however many drafts needed, the final polishing. Organizing the mess of a first draft into an organized second draft can be a daunting project for many writers, but using your table of contents to give your draft structure and begin monitoring its pacing is a solid beginning to approach your round two – one that will hopefully save you work later down the road. 

Alison Acheson’s 11th book, a memoir of caregiving, *Dance Me to the End: Ten Months and Ten Days with ALS*, was released October 2019. She has published for all age groups, from picture books to YA and MG fiction, as well as short fiction.

10

COMMON *romance* TROPES





*...Plus, how
to write them.*

BY KERRIE FLANAGAN



No matter if it's a closed-door, wholesome love story or provocative erotica, every good romance has a central theme, or "trope," as the foundation. A trope is the basic premise around which the story is centered. At first glance, tropes can seem problematic: Who wants to write a predictable plotline? But the truth is that tropes work – and romance readers love them. Readers *like* to have that framework to guide them through the story. It provides anticipation to see how the author will make this particular trope unique while still leading to that happily ever after – or happily for now – that every story must have to be considered romance.

Jennifer Probst, bestselling romance author and author of *Write Naked: A Bestseller's Secrets to Writing Romance & Navigating the Path to Success*, says that tropes have been used throughout history as a concrete, smart way to hook the reader immediately and set up the conflict. "This is true for both movies and books," she says. "From second-chance love to enemies-to-lovers, marriage of convenience, and, yes, even secret baby, readers are familiar with the formula and can anticipate certain beloved ideas and themes woven into the story."

Why do readers like tropes?

Some may say romance stories are all the same because the couple always gets together at the end. Yes, the couple does have their happy ending, but all genre fiction, not just romance, brings with it certain expectations, especially regarding the ending. In a mystery, readers expect the mystery to be solved in a satisfying way, and in a thriller, the hero/heroine makes it out alive despite the harrowing circumstances, etc. These are conventions set up by the genre, and readers appreciate them. “This deliberate unfolding of story can be a source of great comfort and excitement to readers,” Probst says.

Keeping it fresh

While a trope provides you with some guidelines for how a story plays out, it *doesn't* mean you shouldn't get creative as an author. You still need to consider what you can do to make the story different while still staying within the parameters of reader expectations. Utilize your own unique writing voice to add your special touch to the story. Probst adds that the key to effectively writing a trope is to infuse the story with emotion and try to put a fresh spin on a familiar formula: “Some examples of creating unique content would be: flipping gender roles, combining multiple tropes instead of one, instilling dynamic secondary characters, updating traditional tropes into a modern environment – anything that invigorates a story by thinking outside the box.”



While a trope provides you with some guidelines for how a story plays out, it doesn't mean you shouldn't get creative as an author.



10 OF THE MOST COMMON TROPES SEEN IN MODERN ROMANCE

1 Enemies to lovers

It's been said there is a fine line between love and hate, and that's exactly what this trope relies on. In this story, the two love interests start out with an intense dislike for each other. They're constantly at odds, arguing with and annoying one another. This fuels their emotions – making them one tiny step from either falling passionately in love or throwing each other into a pit of scalding lava.

Kristen Callihan, author of *Dear Enemy*, says this trope is one of her favorites because there is so much potential for incredible romantic and sexual tension. “Going deeper, there is also so much room for character growth – either with the character(s) changing into someone kinder, more open, more accepting, or they realize that their ingrained prejudices about their ‘enemy’ were wrong. As an author, you have to give the reader a reason to believe that these people are ultimately good for each other and that they are stronger together than apart. You can't do that successfully if one or both characters are cruel, bullying, or there is an uneven power balance. So, you have to come up with a scenario in which not everything is as it seems – the main characters misinterpreting certain situations, for instance – or, as in *Dear Enemy*, the strife was in the past,

and the characters have grown since then. Finally, at some point in the narrative, these characters, who have been at odds, must somehow lock together and hold each other up. It's a delicate balance, but one that pays off if done correctly."

2 Different worlds

When two characters from vastly different backgrounds fall in love, plenty of problems can arise. Usually, those problems have to do with the other people in the main characters' lives – family members, friends, bosses, etc. – as well as societal norms. Iconic romance movies like *Pretty Woman*, *Dirty Dancing*, and the recent book-turned-blockbuster *Crazy Rich Asians* all illustrate the nuances of this trope. In *Pretty Woman*, a sex worker and a rich businessman end up falling in love; in *Dirty Dancing*, our main characters are a young woman from a privileged background and a dance instructor at a summer resort; and in *Crazy Rich Asians*, it is an American university professor and a wealthy bachelor from a well-known family in Singapore. In all of these examples, the biggest tension comes from the expectations of the main characters' family and friends, who don't approve of the pairing. These external pressures push the lovers to examine what they really want in a relationship and to decide if they are willing to fight for it.

In *Crazy Rich Asians*, the biggest threat to the relationship between Rachel and Nick is his mother, who wants him to find someone with the same social and financial status as their family. The mom spells out her objections in no uncertain terms, and it's a perfect example that illustrates the conflict at the core of a different world trope:

Rachel: ... You didn't like me the second I got here. Why is that?

Mom: There is a Hokkien phrase "kaki lang." It means our own kind of people, and you're not our own kind.

Rachel: Because I'm not rich? Because I didn't go to a British boarding school, or wasn't born into a wealthy family?

Mom: You're a foreigner. American – and all Americans think about is their own happiness.

Rachel: Don't you want Nick to be happy?

Mom: It's an illusion. We understand how to build things that last. Something you know nothing about.

Rachel must decide what is best for her – and how much she is willing to fight for Nick. In these examples, one person is wealthy and the other isn't, but there are other scenarios that can be used as well: neurotic scientist and a creative artist, city boy and a farm girl, or lovers from different races and religions.

3 Second-chance romance

In a second-chance romance, the main characters already know each other because they had a relationship at one time that ended. A large span of time passed, and now they are in each other's lives again. Their past relationship comes with past feelings and emotions, which makes for great tension in a story.

Priscilla Oliveras, author of *Resort to Love*, says, "Whenever I'm writing or reading a second-chance romance, the motivation and conflict behind the breakup, continued time apart, and the reunion are key to making the story believable for me." For Oliveras, the conflict that either initiated the initial breakup or came as a result must be both internal and external. These factors kept the lovers from reuniting, not just a simple miscommunication that could have been easily resolved with a simple conversation. She says, "With Sofia and Nate in *Resort to Love*, his desire to meet his family's expectations and her personal values are key motivators for the decisions they have made. Nate's father looms as a major external conflict for the couple, but the lovers also deal with internal, emotional battles that interweave with their motivations. All of these elements help the reader understand why Nate and Sofia broke up and why it seems impossible for them to be together when they first reunite."

4 Forced proximity

Stressful situations can fuel emotions: Being under a deadline on a project that will make or break your career, being trapped in the snowstorm of the century, and the ultimate in stress – being in (or heavily involved in) a wedding. Add a need to get through this

event with someone you can't stand being around, and you now have the makings of a page-turning, forced-proximity romance filled with anger, frustration, desperation, and, in the end, love.

Remember the popular girl, Claire (Molly Ringwald), and the bad boy, John Bender (Judd Nelson), in *The Breakfast Club*? They were stuck together in detention, and they made it quite clear that they didn't like each other right away. After spending the day together in close quarters, their feelings changed, and they shared a heart-swooning kiss at the end of the movie.

Lauren Billings and Christina Hobbs, who have collaborated on several *New York Times* bestsellers under the pen name Christina Lauren, say this trope works great when there is an external tension that the couple has to contend with, like a storm, a difficult work trip...or a pandemic. "Although there is built-in tension from the proximity itself, it will become claustrophobic if that is the *only* conflict, so broadening the world as much as possible outside of the setting gives the protagonists something to come together around with a common goal...and then realize that they want to kiss," they say.

5 Opposites attract

When two characters who are polar opposites are dropped into each other's lives, the results can be filled with sparks (both good and bad) and lots of opportunities for tension. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, we see this with Bridget and Mark Darcy. He comes across as very

proper and refined, and she drinks, smokes, and has no filter for what she says. They constantly seem to be at odds with each other every time they are in the same room together, until Darcy says to her, "I like you just as you are." Then we watch as these two opposites navigate their differences toward their happily ever after.

Award-winning author Marie Sexton believes opposites attract works so well as a romance trope because both characters get to explain themselves, but both also have to *listen* – and to re-evaluate their priorities and see the other character's point of view. "It's about breaking down assumptions and biases and finding a compromise (something we see way too little of in the real world)," she says. "The pitfall I often see with this trope (more in movies and TV shows than in books, but it still applies) is equating bickering with conflict. The two characters spend most of the story snapping at each other, then magically sweep all those differences under the rug without resolving them. Two people snapping at each other isn't entertaining, nor does it show growth. It's important to keep those conflicts real – to make them deeply personal for the characters – and to show both protagonists revising their position/beliefs/actions for the other."

6 Secret billionaire or celebrity

There are definite perks to being a billionaire, celebrity, or member of royalty, but living a life outside the spotlight is typically not one of them. In a secret billionaire/





celebrity trope, the famous person is usually a man who connects with a love interest who has no idea he is famous and rich. This character lives a life of luxury, but what he craves is to be treated as a “normal person” – at least for a little while. The two begin to fall for each other and she still has no idea who he really is. The moment of truth comes when she finds out his true identity, bringing up feelings of betrayal and questions about trust that they must work through to get their happily ever after.

In Ruth Cardello’s novel *Hollywood Heir*, the plot centers around Eric, who is famous for playing a superhero on television but was just released from a rehab program and is going incognito in London. He wants time to think about his life, and he wants to do it alone. Sage, a plant psychologist, meets him but doesn’t realize he is a celebrity: All she sees is a nice-looking loner who seems to need help, and she wants to be the one to provide it. Initially, he finds her irritating, but that shifts as he begins to see her as sweet and irresistible. Cardello believes the heart of any billionaire/celebrity romance is the hero. “Make him flawed but redeemable,” she says. “Show readers what he yearns for, what internal conflict stops him from getting it, and then introduce him to someone he’s willing to overcome his demons for. If you make his struggle real, readers will be all in for whatever wild ride you write for him.”

7 Marriage of convenience
With this trope, two people get married, but love is nowhere in the equation. The arrangement is more like a business deal, with each character gaining something from the agreement. In her historical romance *The Duchess Deal*, author Tessa Dare builds the story around a marriage of convenience between the Duke of Ashbury and a local seamstress. The Duke needs an heir, and he decides Emma will do as the mother of his child. After setting some

ground rules, they get married, setting the foundation for a great unexpected romance. For Dare, the unavoidable physical proximity makes this trope fun to write. “Whether they’ve had a long courtship or are perfect strangers, the protagonists have to be in one room for the wedding! From there, the author can invent a thousand ways to keep them within arm’s – or lips’ – reach of each other.”

Because the couple has a goal other than love, a marriage of convenience has built-in stakes, like producing an heir in *The Duchess Deal*. “This means they have to sleep together,” she says, “no matter how much they clash outside of bed. Or maybe the two parties have an agreement *never* to sleep together – which becomes increasingly difficult as their attraction grows. Perhaps the marriage of convenience needs to appear genuine to outsiders, which means the characters must pretend to be in love or risk exposing the truth. Obviously the pretense becomes the truth along the way!”

Dare says the big challenge in writing a marriage of convenience is maintaining the tension and conflict throughout the story. “The protagonists are already married. Once they fall in love, what’s keeping them apart? It’s up to the writer to create internal and external obstacles to keep that happily-ever-after uncertain until the end.”

8 Love triangle
Love is complicated enough when there are only two people in the mix – imagine upping the ante with a third. Love triangles require plenty of feelings being tossed around. The classic ’80s movie *Pretty in Pink* sets up a great love triangle trope between three high school seniors. Andie and Duckie are best friends. Duckie is smitten with Andie, but she has fallen for popular rich boy Blane. As feelings between Blane and Andie heat up, Duckie’s hopes of a relationship beyond friendship with Andie begin to sink, but he won’t give up without a fight. This causes tension between the two of them, pushing Andie to dig deep to decide what she wants in a relationship.

A solid love triangle shows both suitors as viable choices for the main character, which adds to the tension for the reader. In *Pretty in Pink*, it is clear to the audience that Duckie adores Andie, they enjoy each other’s company, and are good for

each other in many ways. With Blane, we see he is different than the other rich popular guys at school, and that's what attracts Andie to him. Another key element to this trope is showing what is at stake for the main character with each choice. If Andie chooses Duckie, she risks their friendship; if she chooses Blane, she risks getting hurt and possibly humiliated because they are part of different circles at school.

With a love triangle, someone inevitably is going to get hurt. But once the main character makes the choice, the author must drive the reader to that great happily ever after they have been waiting for.

9 Fake relationship

Picture this: A family wedding is coming up, and the perennially single main character is tired of showing up to family functions alone – and getting the third degree about why she isn't married yet. Out of desperation, she talks a friend into being her date (or even fiancé) for the out-of-town wedding. In a fake relationship trope, it's all about creating a believable situation that forces the main characters to pretend they are dating or even engaged (think of the '80s classic *Can't Buy Me Love*, where Patrick Dempsey's nerdy character hires a popular cheerleader to pretend to be his girlfriend for a month in order to help his social status in high school).

Probst says that each character must gain from the agreement. "Each of them must have a growth arc and change due to this relationship," she says. "Forcing them together creates conflict and an opportunity for change within each of them. The second part of the story is the flip – the moment when the relationship begins to become real. This is a huge investment for the reader and must pay off. Their problems haven't disappeared – in fact,


conflict has now risen because the couple is now trying to find a way they can be together and make the relationship work. A writer needs to dig deep into the two characters for this trope and create obstacles to their relationship that are real – then find a way for one or both characters to make a sacrifice to be together or a compromise. Love may overcome all, but usually it's because the characters have grown, changed, and made choices to get them there."

10 Friends to lovers

This trope involves an established friendship between the two main characters. They already know each other's habits, likes, dislikes, dreams, and aspirations. We skip past the "meet cute" moment and start setting up the story to show that these two could be more than friends.

Jillian Dodd, author of the *That Boy* series, loves the friends-to-lovers trope because she finds it so relatable. "Realistically, a reader is probably not going to meet a prince, but more than likely, they either have or have had a friend who they have crushed on." She advises that when writing this trope, an author needs to consider the consequences for their specific characters. The big questions are, what will happen if they do decide to be more than friends? What if it doesn't work – can they stay friends? Also, what if one wants more than friendship and the other one doesn't? "Knowing your character's personalities and how they deal with life in general will help you determine their individual reactions, which in turn helps shape your plot," Dodd says.

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Like a cozy blanket on a wintry day, tropes wrap readers in a comforting structure that fulfills their expectations. A skilled writer can use that framework but still create a unique story that is engaging and draws readers all the way through to the happily ever after. 

Kerrie Flanagan is an author, writing consultant, and freelance writer from Colorado with over 20 years' experience in the industry. She is the author of *WD Guide to Magazine Article Writing*. She moonlights in the world of romance with a co-author under the pen name C.K. Wiles (ckwiles.com) and in sci-fi/fantasy realm under the pen name C.G. Harris (cgharris.net). KerrieFlanagan.com



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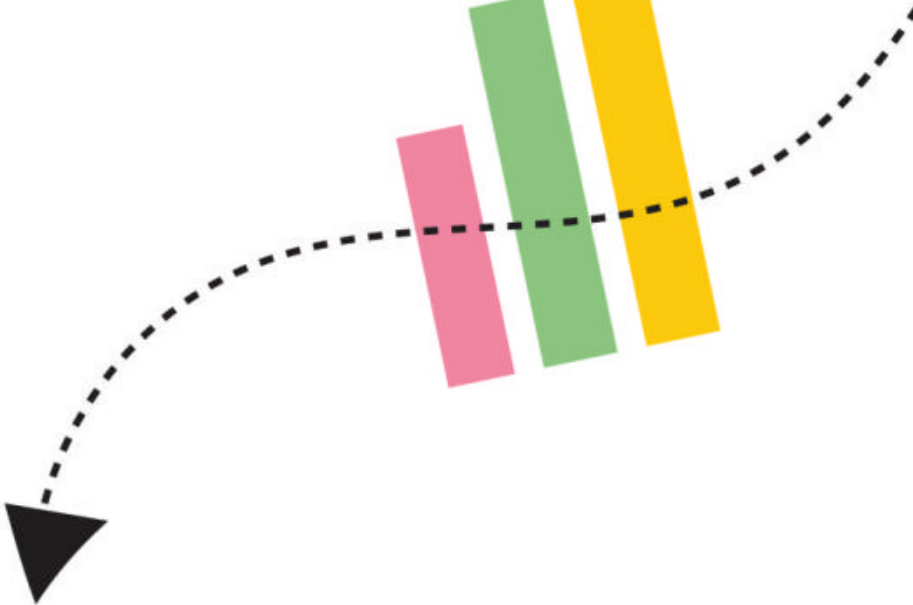
Zoom- onomics

101



How to sell more books
at a virtual book launch.

BY JESSICA STILLING



don't think I really knew what Zoom was until I needed to take a crash course in it in order to teach my first pandemic-era Novel Writing class at The Gotham Writers Workshop.

The very day that Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that all public buildings in New York City would be shut, Gotham called a meeting of its teachers to give us all a crash course in the platform. I'm not what one would call tech-savvy, but Zoom was pretty easy to figure out, and though there were some hiccups, it was pretty convenient – and soon, the rest of the country learned it too: How it functions, how to troubleshoot, and what lighting presents the best version of our at-home selves to the virtual world.

It's almost impossible to launch a book during these COVID times without hosting virtual readings, launch parties, and discussion events. But I never realized how much authors need gatherings to truly thrive.

Writing is in many ways a solitary profession, but publishing is not. Authors need to get out there and mingle with readers to promote their work. Pre-pandemic, there were many places to do that: bookstores, libraries, trade shows, and book events like New York's BookExpo or the Bay Area Book Festival, etc. While some shops and libraries have opened to smaller, controlled groups, most places are still largely shuttered, especially to larger crowds. Authors and publishers, like everyone else, have had to adapt to the new normal and find new ways to promote things without in-person appearances.

I had a novel set to come out last May. I thought there was a chance (at least in the beginning of all this) that by May, it would all be OK. But we all know now no one was going to open up for an in-person book launch party in May 2020, especially for an event with a set goal to pack as many people in as possible. And so I

contented myself (and even got really excited for) my virtual launch. My publisher had just been to a web conference on Zoom book launches with his distributor, and he was very excited. "I know we can't go to trade shows. The New York BookExpo is out. But at least we can do this," he said.

Great, I thought. My sister in Portland, Oregon, and my family in Illinois will finally get to come to one of my book launches. I'll be able to invite people who might not want to go out but might just turn on their computer. As I started to prepare for my virtual book launch, I considered all the ways this would be better than the old bookstore model.

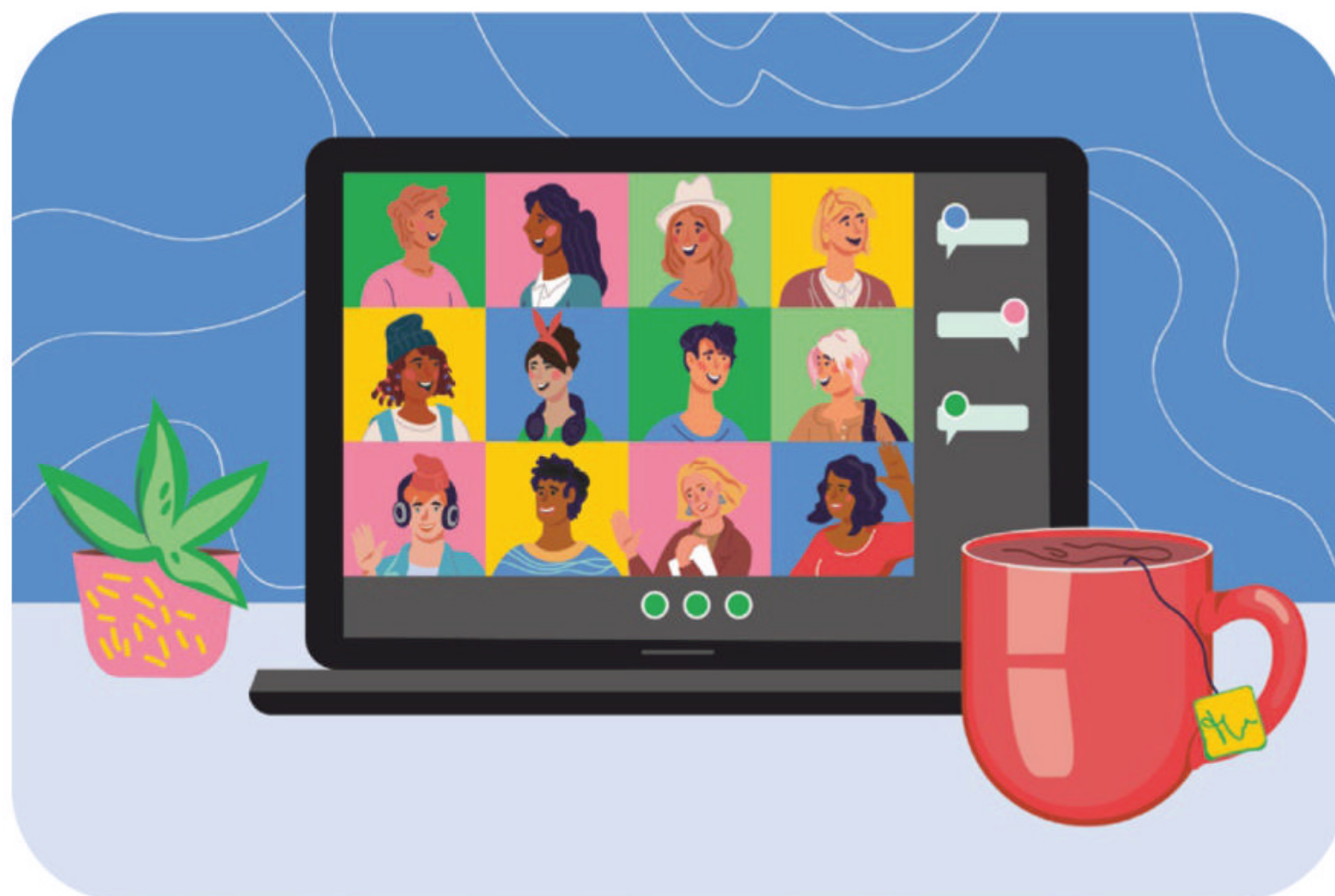
Then the launch happened. It wasn't the same thing as a bookstore launch, but I thought it went well. I didn't have a shop behind me like I'd had for the launch of *The Beekeeper's*

Daughter, a literary novel I'd published just months before in December, but I was able to hype the launch on social media pretty easily. I made fliers and had friends email the friends of friends and post them on their social media sites. I even felt safe enough posting the meeting code on Facebook for perfect strangers to access. And I will say the launch was crowded. Usually about 12 to 15 people came to an in-person event, but the virtual event brought in about 25 people. Because so many people

Out of all those people who had come to my book launch, only three had bought the book the day of the launch.

came from many different locations the event was a success as a social event in virtual space. People I knew came from many states, which contributed to the higher number of participants. People I didn't know came. My moderator asked great questions. I was on fire with an involved Q&A and a lively reading from the novel. It went over an hour. All good things, right?

And then I got the sales reports from the bookstore I was working with. Out of all those people who had come to my book launch, only three had bought the book the day of the launch.



But that's OK, I said to myself. This will drive sales later. Maybe they were just tired after the launch, I thought, remembering that it *had* ended at 9:00 p.m. They'd pick it up tomorrow. Or in a few days. And while the book did sell more copies than those first three purchases over the next few weeks, it didn't sell that well – certainly not as well as my other books had sold after similar, but in-person, launches. When I politely asked a few people who had come to the launch if they'd picked up the book, most of them said, "No, not yet. I'll get right on that." Judging by the sales figures, they never did.

And so while the Zoom launch was fun, while it was packed and people seemed to enjoy coming together (a friend of mine told me that the launch had given him his first reason to have a good, stiff drink since the lockdown)...not many of them actually bought the book.

I started to wonder about the difference in sales figures. I came up with a few guesses right away, and then I did some research and learned some things about economics and the human psyche. Turns out it's different to see an Amazon link, or even a link to a smaller bookstore that might be hosting your Zoom book launch, than it is seeing a physical book you can grab and pay for on the spot. Customers want

convenience. You have to make it easy for them to buy your stuff. And clicking an Amazon link during a Zoom party, filling out all your shipping and billing information, triple-checking your credit card number – it just isn't as satisfying as seeing a physical book at eye level that you can simply grab and take home with you instantly with one swipe of a credit card.

And also, I thought, maybe, just maybe, there's something about having the author right there standing in front of you in person – whether it's peer pressure or just the awe of seeing the author before your eyes – that might inspire (or shame) a book launch attendee into buying a book on the spot. One thing was clear: When they didn't buy on the spot, many of them – even close friends or colleagues I knew in the writing community! – didn't buy at all.

Something else I learned during my Econ 101 research was that most people who come for something for free, whether it's an event or free content on a blog or website, rarely pay for the premium version offered alongside the freebie. In



fact, only a small fraction of the people who consume content you give away for free will then turn around and actually purchase something. Plus, people are more likely to purchase something that is right in front of them on an impulse buy (like, say, a book in a bookstore) than if they can go home and think about whether they really want to make the purchase. Potential readers have to go through the extra step of ordering the book after the launch – they might just be too tired after a night on Zoom, close the laptop, and completely forget by the next morning.

As I watched my sales numbers drop from the books I'd previously launched, I started to think more and more about the difference between a good, old fashioned face-to-face book launch party, one held at a bookstore or another venue (pre-COVID I had gone to book launches at people's homes, even one at a pretty happening bar in Greenwich Village), and a virtual launch. And, yes, there is something magical about face-to-face contact, and I do hope that we can once again safely congregate in larger groups, but until then Zoom book launches, just like Zoom board meetings and Zoom classrooms, seem to be here to stay. And honestly, even when we do return to more in-person friendly launches, a Zoom launch is still a good idea for those fans, family, and friends who don't live in your area and aren't going to be able to get to you.

To be fair, too, I know a launch isn't *just* about selling books (and making money). Yes, it's good to get your name out there. Yes, it's good to create community around your brand and your work. But authors need to sell books as well, not only to make money to, y'know, *live*, but also to justify to their publishers why they deserve to have their next book published. That's the industry and the world we live in. So how can authors sell more books at all these Zoom readings, launches, book talks, and other events increasingly popping up on our calendars?

Here are a few ideas.

Play up the small business angle, but play the local angle harder

Don't just throw an Amazon link to your book up on the screen. Even if you're working with a small press (which is many times also a mom-and-pop business), don't ask people to purchase the books through the publisher – that's just not local

enough. Partner with a small bookstore (or two, maybe even three if you know people from more than one locale are going to come) and try to give your launch a local feel. If you're doing Zoom launches for various communities in different places, partner with a local bookstore in each spot.

For my most recent book event, I had invited mostly people from my hometown in Illinois and a small town in Ver-

mont where I had spent a lot of time. I made sure to partner with two small-town bookstores, bookstores people attending the event might know. I then made sure to plug the bookstores and the sense of local pride. At one point, I said, "I know the people from Illinois will want to buy this from the Illinois bookstore, and the Vermonters will want to get the book from the Vermont bookstore." It was just an offhand statement, but it plays up local pride and makes people feel like they are helping out a small business in their own community. I even put together a PowerPoint presentation with pictures of the mom and pop bookstore owners standing in front of their stores, videos of the places, and interviews with

the owners talking about how sales are down because of COVID. By making people feel like they're supporting an author and also supporting Main Street as well, it's more likely they'll actually buy.

Give them a reason to come back

I realized that by offering a follow-up reading or discussion, I could not only bring people back to me and keep them thinking about my book, but I also might be able to get a few people to buy the book for the next discussion. To accompany my last launch discussion, I curated a few questions that connected to hot-button, thematic issues that people might come back for a Zoom talk about. My last novel, *Nod*, was about a peaceful primordial civilization that is corrupted when a larger, more capitalistic group of people come to town. I decided to not only discuss the book but present the book as an indictment of capitalism, and I connected my novel and the themes of it to other issues surrounding capitalism. Many people, about 20, showed up for the Zoom, and I saw that a few people had brought their books to the dis-

Most people who come for something for free, whether it's an event or free content on a blog or website, rarely pay for the premium version.

cussion. I also noticed that book sales had gone up a little bit before the discussion and they went up a bit more after it as well. I also hosted a read-along of the book after another launch party. The plan was to do a reading and discussion and then ask people to share passages from the book that they wanted to talk about. I scheduled it for two weeks after a couple of my other virtual events to give people time to order and receive the book, then I played up the idea that they could read their favorite passages from the book (hence, it would help to have the book in hand). A few people showed up without the book, but I saw that many people were there, book in hand, ready to discuss.

Bookplates!

One of the things I miss most about in-person events is signing my books. There's nothing like seeing someone who has just listened to me speak, someone I may or may not know, come up to me, book in hand, a sheepish smile on their face, as they ask me to sign their book. It's part of the deal at these events. Attendees buy your book, here and now, right in front of you, and they receive an autographed copy. They get to say that they met the author. They get to show it to their grandkids and say, "I knew her when." And we don't have to break that tradition just because we can't meet in-person. It might cost a little more in postage (but who doesn't want to help out the USPS right now?) but offering to send signed bookplates to people who have bought your book is a goodwill gesture, a way to continue to connect with the people who support you. There are many printing shops, the places where authors purchase their swag, that will make custom bookplates using all or part of your cover, or you can pick up a bookplate that uses a theme that works for your book. (Some authors only send the bookplates to people who can produce a receipt for your book, but I think that's going too far. I want to trust my readers, and anyone who asks for a signed bookplate is welcome to one.)

Offer swag bags or giveaways


Another marketing tool that works well for authors is swag. Anyone who publishes a book is familiar with going to the printer to order bookmarks, postcards, or, if they're feeling generous, maybe some personalized totes or hats or T-shirts. Swag comes in all shapes and sizes. Some people just like to purchase the whole package, and so I've sent swag bags that I promote at my virtual events to small bookstores to mail out with purchased books. It gives people a sense that they're

buying more than a book. You can charge a little more for these book-bag combinations, and the people browsing the bookstores (masked and socially distanced, of course) are more intrigued by a bag containing not only a book but also some bookmarks and a magnet or baseball cap and might make that impulse purchase in the store. Offering to give away a few of these swag bags is also a good virtual marketing technique.

Showcase your event on YouTube

You might try offering your event up as a discussion on Insert-Current-Topic-Thematically-Connected-to-Your-Book-Here. This works for fiction writers as well as nonfiction writers. Record your entire event, and then offer it up as a whole or in bits and pieces to platforms like YouTube, which can lead to views and potential book purchases down the road. If you talk a lot about your writing process, maybe you label a section as a lecture on The Craft of Writing. If you tell a story about how you were inspired to write your book, you might call this section Where Creative Ideas Come From. So much of what we say as authors is valuable information for not only those who care about our books but also aspiring writers or writers who might find themselves stuck or want inspiration, and so it's important to put what we say (not just what we write) out there for people to see and hear and experience.

• • •

At the end of the day, it's all about our writing and how to get our work into the hands of as many readers as possible. I learned through trial and error that Zoom parties are their own unique animal, and you can't just emulate online what you would do in-person to make it work as well as possible for a totally different medium. But with a few tweaks and some thinking and planning, Zoom parties can hopefully sell as much or more as in-person events. 

Jessica Stilling has published two literary novels, *Betwixt and Between* and *The Beekeeper's Daughter*, a novel exploring the life of the poet Sylvia Plath. She has also published three young adult fantasy novels, including *Nod*, her most recent publication, which explores the life of the biblical Cain from a modern perspective. She sits on the editorial board of the Global City Press, and she teaches creative writing at Gotham Writers Workshop.





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WRITING PROMPTS

**These exercises will keep
your creativity flowing
all winter long.**



PROMPTS FOR LOCKDOWN

Stuck inside? Let these exercises and exploratory questions transport you.

1. What's your most memorable trip? Not necessarily your *favorite*, but rather a voyage so vivid and distinct in your memory that you can recall everything in the clearest detail. Write about one particularly distinct moment in that trip.
2. If you could pick one small element, one fragment, of the dining-out experience that you miss most, what would it be? The smell of your favorite local bakery? Sharing appetizers with friends without worry? The taste of a cold draught beer?
3. What was the next trip you had planned before COVID-19 hit: A summer vacation, a honeymoon, or spring break? What would that trip have been like? Write about one thing you were most looking forward to about this trip.
4. What's an outfit in your closet that you can't wait to have a reason to wear again? Why is it so special to you? How do you feel when you wear it?
5. Spending so many hours under the same roof without opportunity for escape can lead to increased tension and conflict – two ingredients perfect for fueling a short story's plot. Pen your own narrative about two characters who can't escape each other, whether they're together in lockdown, snowed in, forced to become roommates, or trapped in a haunted house.

SETTING THE SCENE



Choose a setting from the following list as the setting for a short story in your favorite genre:

1. A cozy cottage at a deserted ski resort.
2. A tropical beach with a hurricane approaching.
3. A lakeside cabin with troubling neighbors.
4. An all-expenses-paid resort with a dark secret.
5. A private jet with no expense spared.
6. A themed cruise ship that must make an unexpected stop.
7. A corn maze after hours.
8. A local business's last day of operation before it closes permanently.
9. A fan convention for a long-canceled TV show of your choosing.
10. A world championship tournament for a niche sport or hobby.

WORDPLAY

Ready to loosen up your linguistic muscles? These wordy workouts will help.

1. Choose five consonants and one vowel for a poem or a work of flash fiction. How many words can you use that start with one of the six letters before you need to use another letter?
2. Alternatively, can you choose the same six letters and omit them entirely from your poem?
3. Now, choose just *one* letter and write a work that uses that letter in each word.
4. Write a prose piece entirely in iambic pentameter.
5. Use RandomWordGenerator.com to select 15 words at random: six nouns, seven verbs, and two adjectives. Work each word into a work in a genre of your choosing.
6. Have you heard of Pilish? It's a constraint where each word in a given work has the same number of letters as each digit in the number π , so your first word would have three letters, your second would have one, your third would have four, and so on. See how long you can progress through the number before your work reaches a natural conclusion.
7. Choose an article at random from your favorite online publication or a short story from your favorite journal to craft an erasure poem, which is created by removing some of the words in an existing text to form a brand-new work.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Looking for some opportunities to delve deep into introspection this winter? These soul-searching exercises might help.

1. Write about a time you had to accept a loss, whether it's in sports, at work, or on the school playground. Were you a "good" loser or a sore one? (Are there such things as "good losers," anyway?) Would you have done anything differently, looking back?
2. Picture an argument with a friend or relative from the other side's perspective. What motivated that person to take that particular stance? Can you write out that scene from memory using their perspective? If the argument was restarted today, would you still take the same stance?
3. Can you remember a time when you overcame your self-doubt to achieve something? How specifically did you overcome it? Is there anything you can glean from that moment to help you overcome it in the future?
4. What was the first moment you knew you wanted to pursue writing? Is there anyone in particular from your family or your schooling who helped you realize your ability?
5. Do you have a nonparental loved one or family friend who impacted you in a way you see now but didn't fully appreciate growing up? How did they affect you then, and in what way does their influence affect your adult life now?

28-DAY WORD CHALLENGE

If you've been feeling stuck or uninspired lately, perhaps a month of play is just the ticket to revive your regular writing practice. Schedule a freewriting session each day in February, using the words below as your springboard for each freewrite. (You can go in order or make a list, cut them out, and pull one out of a hat each day for more spontaneity.)



1 Tension	2 Spark	3 Blossom	4 Drown
5 Eject	6 Fizzle	7 Erupt	8 Pitch
9 Classified	10 Skeleton	11 Pop	12 Blunt
13 Cost	14 Heart	15 Flounder	16 Thread
17 Beam	18 Surrender	19 Glow	20 Thrive
21 Decay	22 Embrace	23 Precedent	24 Rumor
25 Trade	26 Crush	27 Tame	28 Owe

GROUP WORK

Who says writing practice can't be a team sport? Grab a writer-friend or two to participate in one of these collaborative prompts.

1. Dialogue is an essential part of any writer's arsenal, but our conversations are frequently happening more and more online. Pair up with a friend to write a story using only texts or DMs as your medium. You can establish characters and a jumping-off point beforehand or keep your ideas a secret and just uncover the story as you go along.
2. If you'd prefer a slower pace to your collaboration, consider asking a friend if they'd like to take a snail-mail stab at an epistolary story. They write one letter from a character's perspective and send it off. You write the next, they send a response, and both of you continue until you agree the story has reached its natural conclusion. (This is also a great excuse to finally use all that lovely stationery you've been hoarding.)
3. Need help restraining your inner editor while you draft? Invite a friend along for some accountability. Open up a new Google doc, share it with your chosen writing partner, and write the first line. It's their job to write the next sentence, while you then pen the third, they do the fourth, and so on. The catch? Neither one of you is allowed to self-edit as you write – keep the clunky phrasings, the not-quite-right adjectives, and minor typos right where they are and focus on moving forward. Having someone else as a witness while you craft in a low-stakes setting might help you break the constant-editing habit once and for all.
4. If you'd prefer group work instead, call several wordsmith friends together for a Zoom freewriting session. Everyone should come prepared with a starter first sentence that will kick off a freewriting session. The host reads their sentence prompt, starts a phone timer for 7 minutes, and then watches the clock until the timer goes off. They choose the next "host," who will then read their sentence, keep watch until the timer sounds, and select the next person to read and keep time. When everyone's had a turn reading their sentence, participants can opt to share their work if desired and see how everyone's creative paths varied based on the same starting point (alternatively, if you'd rather not share, attendees can simply discuss the challenges they faced with each sentence).
5. Maybe a slower-paced collaboration feels more your style. Take the same idea as above but at a slower pace: Each week, someone emails out a sample first line to the group. Then, after having multiple days to mull it over and write a response piece, everyone shares their work, whether it's on Zoom, in a private Facebook group or Discord server, or in a simple email chain.

CONFLICT & TENSION

Without a source of conflict, there's nothing to propel a fictional plot forward. Use these tension-ridden circumstances to raise the stakes in your next work of fiction.

1. Imagine your own version of a small-town feud: Perhaps it's two dueling coffeeshops across the street from one another or a pair of homeowners who compete to win the town's annual award for having the best holiday decorations. What lengths will each party go to in order to win? Can you see a natural conclusion for your feud? If so, who ultimately bests the other party?
2. Write about two opposing forces within a family: a wife trying to wrest a Fourth of July picnic from her ailing but wildly stubborn mother-in-law, a daughter trying to escape the family business her parents hope she'll take over, a dinner table divided over support for a war or movement, etc.
3. Picture a protagonist about to enter a national food competition, whether it's for pitmasters, pie bakers, or a series of *Chopped*-style elimination rounds. The catch? Their biggest competition is also their biggest crush – or, alternatively, their ex.
4. Write about a debate that goes terribly awry, whether it's a formal academic debate or a conversation with a stranger at a bar.
5. Imagine a confrontation surrounding a financial or less-tangible debt. What will be lost if the debt cannot be repaid? What are the consequences?

SENSORY SKILLS

Isolate each of the five senses with these targeted exercises.


BOOKISH DELIGHTS

The literary fruits of another author's labors can serve as the creative seeds for your own writing practice.

1. Rewrite the ending of a well-known fairy tale, myth, or classic work of literature. How will you put a fresh spin on its famous conclusion?
2. Tell a story from the perspective of a minor character in a major work.
3. Write the plot of a famous book as a newspaper article, complete with its own attention-grabbing headline.
4. Do you remember the first book that struck you not because of its story or characters but because of its prose? What was that book, and how has it inspired you as a writer? Can you see any traces of that particular author's style in your own work?
5. Alternatively, can you write a story, poem, or reflection in the style of that particular author?

1. Use a random image generator (writingexercises.co.uk has a great one) to find some visual writing inspiration and write a story, poem, or essay based on whichever picture comes up – no cheating! If you'd rather a slightly less random approach, you can browse Pinterest, search hashtags on Instagram, or enter random words into Google Image Search until you find an image that strikes a creative match in your brain.
2. Play a random song from the soundtrack of a film you've never seen. Close your eyes as you listen for the first time: What emotions do you feel as the song plays? What do you imagine might be happening in each shift in the music? When it's finished, write a short story or poem based on the song you've just heard.
3. Finding new scents to inspire our writing is harder with a respiratory virus on the loose. Thankfully, perfume and cologne copywriters have already done the lion's share of the work when it comes to crafting descriptions of scents so vivid, we can practically smell them in the air. Browse retailers like luckyscent.com to find a product that speaks to you, and then write a character study of a person who would wear this particular fragrance. What kind of person might wear Strangers Parfumerie's "Roasted Coffee," a unisex blend containing "the plush softness of fine Italian suede, refined with the boozy smoothness of aged bourbon

whisky and a touch of tobacco smoke?" Who might breeze through a cloud of "Into the Void" from Juliette Has a Gun, a perfume in which "animalic, ambery wood notes meld with a patchouli so sharp it's almost two dimensional," with an effect described as "haunting, deep but delicate, and utterly original?" Once you've mastered your own character samples, try your hand at describing your favorite scents like a fragrance copywriter would, characterizing each note and overall effect in lush detail.

4. Recipes are arguably an art form in their own right. Try your hand at writing emotional recipes featuring memorable foods from your childhood. What else did your mother stir into her famous chicken soup recipe to make it taste so hearty and wholesome? Which other, less-tangible ingredients made that cardboard-like cafeteria pizza so disgusting in your memory? Combine flavor with feeling to create your own box of memory-laced recipe cards from the past.
5. What textures in your life do you find yourself reaching for to provide comfort in this period of your life? Is there a set of flannel pajamas that instantly bring you a sense of calm or a wooly pair of slippers you can't get through a day without? Write an ode to the most comforting textile in your life right now, whether it's in the form of a proper poetic ode or a less-structured prose piece. 

Vestal Review

This journal has been seeking eclectic flash fiction for more than two decades.

Aesop's fables, those very short stories involving tortoises and hares and mice and such, are considered by many to be the first flash fiction. In more contemporary times, we have the literary flash magazine *Vestal Review*, founded in March 2000.

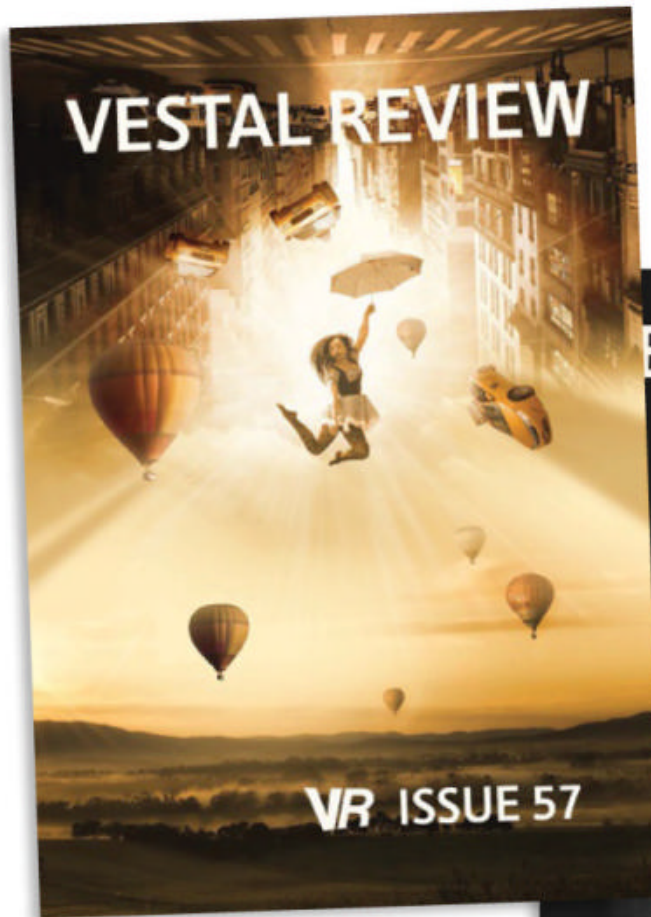
Vestal's editor, David Galef, wrote *Brevity: A Flash Fiction Handbook* (Columbia University Press, 2016). "A good piece of flash resonates with me in a way that a longer story doesn't," he explains. "It's like a perfect miniature, like those portraits you used to see in museums – tiny pictures of someone's face in which everything – setting, description, character development – is perfectly proportioned."

Galef and his staff are eclectic in their taste, and they deeply appreciate diversity. "We're especially seeking submissions from underrepresented authors," he notes.

Tone, editorial content

Vestal Review editors look for fiction in every genre, up to 500 words – stories, Galef says, that differ from lyrical prose poetry. "We want narratives that move from Point A to Point B by the end. Too many stories have endings that lack a certain punch," he says. "A good last line snaps the rest of the story suddenly into place. I'm a sucker for arresting openings and killer last lines."

He's a fan of flash fiction writer Len Kuntz ("No one gets quicker into a dysfunctional family in a story than he does") and Jeffrey Whitmore. He refers to Whitmore's 53-word "Bed-time Story" as a perfect miniature.



"There are two characters and an implied third. It's a thriller plot with good dialogue and a twist ending." Anthologized widely, Whitmore's story reads:

"Careful, honey, it's loaded," he said, re-entering the bedroom. Her back rested against the headboard. "This for your wife?"

"No. too chancy. I'm hiring a professional."

"How about me?"

He smirked. "Cute. But who'd be dumb enough to hire a female hit man?"

She wet her lips, sighting along the barrel. "Your wife."

Contributors

Past contributors include Bruce Holland Rogers, Aimee Bender, Robert Olen Butler, Steve Almond, Katharine Weber, Judith Cofer, Claire Tristram, and Pamela Painter.

Minyoung Lee has a piece in Issue 55 titled "Since She Could No Longer Say I Love You," about a small boy grieving for his mother on the beach where they used to collect shells. She writes:

"If all the shells on this beach could be ordered in a line, they

would guide his mom back home from where she was lost. But every time the boy's line grew as long as he was tall, the climbing tide lapped against it, pushing away a shell or two, forging the clean edge into wobbly stubs."

George Choundas has a piece in issue 56 titled "Last Bus Tonight," about a grief-stricken woman outside a hospital gazing at a city bus and deciding not to climb aboard. He writes:

"I am for you, is what the bus was really saying. I am for you, veteran, so board now and take your ease. We'll go away together.

Let's go away together, away from wound and memory, into the forgetting soft of night.

That's what the bus was saying. It was too kind, too much kindness after all of it. She preferred to walk."

Galef is eager to publish Nashiu Zahir's "Speak Loose" in Issue 57. It's the story of a character among friends as relationships begin to unravel. "At the end, you're not sure where you are or what's going to happen," he says. "The best flash fiction defies easy description."

He's also excited to publish Preeti Vangani's "Who Needs Rehab When You Have a Man." "The title is self-explanatory," he says. "She quotes lines from Amy Winehouse while detailing a brief, unsatisfactory relationship with a man and ends with a killer last line."

Advice for potential contributors

Genre fiction is welcome in *Vestal Review*. Pornography, racism, excessive gore, and preaching are not. "We're always looking for something fresh and arresting. We're happy to hear new voices with an imaginative use of lan-

"An exciting venue for exceptional flash fiction by both emerging and well-known authors."

Reading period: Print: February-May, August-November. Online: June and December.

Length: 500 words or less.

Genres: Fiction, including speculative, romance, contemporary, political, humor.

Payment: \$50.

Contest: 2021 Vestal Review Award.

Submission format: Via Submittable online.

Contact: David Galef, Editor, vestalreview.net

guage," Galef says. "And we'd love more political fiction."

In flash, he says, writers must resort to what he calls "compaction tricks. One representative detail for an entire face or personality, one plot event rather than three, and one line that does something at the end rather than an entire paragraph," he explains. He urges writers to avoid clichés. "*Beat him to the punch. Little did he know?* These phrases are everyone's property," he explains. "Try something different."

Plot and characterization can be cliché as well, he notes. "I see a lot of abusive father characters in stories. I'd never say don't go with that, but there must be something you can do to freshen up this character type," he says. "Readers want novelty. Give us a story we haven't heard in a way we haven't heard before." 📧

Contributing Editor Melissa Hart is the author of *Better with Books: 500 Diverse Books to Ignite Empathy and Encourage Self-Acceptance in Tweens and Teens* (Sasquatch, 2019). Twitter/Instagram: @WildMelissaHart

The
Writer



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Romance Slam Jam Book Lovers' Convention

This five-day virtual event connects romance writers with both industry professionals and devoted fans of the genre in a diverse and inclusive setting.

Twenty-five years ago, Black romance authors started the Romance Slam Jam – an annual gathering for authors of color and the readers who love them. The five-day event attracts writers from a wide variety of marginalized communities.

RSJ Chairperson Bonita Thornton has attended the convention for over 15 years. “There was a lack of diversity in the industry,” she explains. “Authors of color would go to conferences, pay for a table, and no one would stop at their booth and talk to them. RSJ got started so that the authors of color would have an audience that wanted their books. Now, we’re embracing all authors because that’s true diversity.”

The event’s marketing specialist, Karol Jarvis, agrees. “One of last year’s LGBTQ attendees told us, ‘I’ve never felt welcomed so much.’ A lot of authors are homing in on us, either because they’re authors of color or marginalized in another way, or because they want to make sure their writing doesn’t offend anyone.”

What you’ll learn

Writers attending the convention can take workshops on how to write interracial romance, how to include diversity in young adult fiction, and how to create authentic characters in historical fiction.

Attendees learn how to pitch a book in preparation for online pitch sessions



Romance authors Rina Gray (left) and Lisa Rayne (right) attend an RSJ workshop.

with editors from major romance publishing houses. RSJ offers workshops on how to design a compelling book cover, edit your work, build an audience by taking advantage of various social media platforms, and navigate the differences between traditional and self-publishing.

“One of the important things newbies will learn is how much work is involved when you’re traditionally published and how much is involved when you publish independently,” Jarvis says. “A lot of the workshops reveal

information that you wouldn’t know if you’re a new writer. And if you’ve published a book, you’ll learn strategies for how to sell that book – tips like instead of coming out with one book, come out with three, so that you always have a book for your reader and you don’t lose your audience.”

Last year, participants also learned how to overcome professional jealousy, break into audiobooks, get their books into libraries, and do a radio or TV interview.



Award-winning authors Pamela Samuels Young (left) and Marissa Monteilh (right) attend the RSJ Emma awards.

Conference: Romance Slam Jam Book Lovers' Convention

Dates: Aug. 4-8, 2021

Cost: \$25-\$285

Location: Remote

Awards: Leslie Esdaile Banks Aspiring Author and RSJ Emma Awards

Contact: Conference chairperson Bonita Thornton at info@rsjconvention.com
rsjconvention.com

Featured presenters

In 2020, featured presenters at RSJ Book Lovers' Convention included Julie Gwinn from The Seymour Agency speaking on "How to Break Out in Christian Fiction" and *New York Times* bestselling author Pintip Dunn on "How to Keep Your Readers Turning Pages Late into the Night."

Bestselling authors Farrah Rochon, Naima Simone, and Nina Crespo spoke on a panel titled "Everything I Wish I'd Known Before I Got Into Publishing." Authors Hadley Raydeen, Saharra K. Sandhu, Moni Boyce, and Stephanie Morris participated in a panel about intimate paranormal romance.

Heather Howland, senior editor at Entangled Publishing, gave a talk titled "Every Action has a Reaction: A Foolproof Deep POV Dive." Bestselling author Dahlia Rose spoke about "The Journey from Indie Author to Hallmark."

Many authors participate in the convention's annual Pajama Café Cliffhanger Night. "That's one of my

favorites," Thornton says. "When we met in person, we'd go to our rooms at night, come back in our pajamas, and authors would read a cliffhanger section of their books to get people interested in their story. For the remote conference in 2020, we took a break after the evening session, and then everyone came back to their computers with snacks and their pajamas. It felt like we were all together in person."


Advice for first-time attendees

RSJ staff encourage first-timers to enter the Leslie Esdaile Banks Aspiring Author contest. Entrants must submit three chapters of a manuscript with a multicultural protagonist. The winner receives a mentorship with a published author. In 2018, South Carolina author Michele Sims won the contest. She's now the author of six novels.

Emerging authors have another exciting opportunity as well. From January until August of 2021, RSJ and the romance publisher Harlequin will partner to create an "incubator." "We're

going to have webinars to help writers figure out exactly which Harlequin line they'd like to write for and to ensure that they're approaching their manuscripts in the right way," Jarvis says. "This will help authors who'd like to be traditionally published."

Thornton urges first-time attendees to take advantage of the numerous opportunities to meet people during the convention. Staff host remote reading-related games during the convention to help introverted authors network with one another and with industry professionals.

"New authors attend the event to build their audience. Often, when a reader discovers an author in attendance, they'll buy her book," Thornton says. "At RSJ, you get to network with published authors, editors, bloggers, and readers themselves." 

Contributing Editor Melissa Hart is the author of *Better with Books: 500 Diverse Books to Ignite Empathy and Encourage Self-Acceptance in Tweens and Teens* (Sasquatch, 2019).
Twitter/Instagram: @WildMelissaHart

Workshopy

Writing conferences are packed with panel discussions, keynote speeches, and workshops to help hone your writing. Because of COVID, most workshops have gone virtual for 2021. It's worth double-checking their plans as changes are happening each day.

Here are some tips for making the most out of conference craft sessions.

1. **Do your research.** Before you sign up for a conference, explore the faculty lineup and daily schedule to see what sessions will be beneficial to your work. Note the workshops you'd like to attend and find out what the protocol is for registering. And do so by the cutoff date.
2. **Be prepared.** If you are asked to bring a piece to workshop, make sure you have it. Likewise, pack all of the items you'll need – notepad, pens, your tablet, a voice recorder – to ensure you and your work will continue to benefit from the workshop once you're back at home.
3. **Keep an open mind.** Whether commenting on someone else's work or hearing feedback on your own, be open to new ideas and different ways of thinking. One person's method (including your own) is not the law of the land, and you can learn a lot from simply interacting with other writers.

Information in this section is provided to *The Writer* by the individual markets and events; for more information, contact those entities directly.

» CONFERENCES

ALASKA

Kachemak Bay Writers' Conference

Homer, Alaska, May 15-18 (virtual). Offers daily workshops, readings, and panel presentations in fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and the business of writing. Manuscript reviews and academic credit also available. Closing speaker: Ernestine Hayes. **Contact:** Kachemak Bay Writers' Conference. rsbrewer@alaska.edu
writersconference.homer.alaska.edu

ARIZONA

Desert Nights, Rising Stars

Writers Conference

Tempe, Arizona, February 18-21 (virtual). Hosted by the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing at Arizona State University. Schedule includes craft talks, workshops, panels, and readings. Faculty includes Beverly Jenkins, Hena Khan, and Suyi Davies Okungbowa. **Contact:** Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing, P.O. Box 875002, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287. 480-965-6018. pipercenter.info@asu.edu
piper.asu.edu/conference

CALIFORNIA

Digital Author and Indie Publishing Conference

Van Nuys, California, Nov 6-14 (virtual). For authors who want to learn about the new publishing paradigms in an increasingly digital world. Industry experts, educators, agents,

and publishers make up the list of speakers, who will explain new technologies and methodologies. Presentations on indie publishing, eBooks, A-Books and P-Books, your author platform, and marketing ideas. **Contact:** West Coast Writers Conferences, P.O. Box 2267, Redondo Beach, CA 90278. 310-379-2650
info@wcwriters.com
wcwriters.com/daisp/index.html

San Francisco Writers Conference

San Francisco, California, returning in 2022. Top authors, agents, and editors meet to discuss fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and specialty writing such as children's books and travel writing. Other topics include marketing, self-publishing, and internet possibilities and trends. Also offers "speed dating with agents." **Contact:** San Francisco Writers Conference, P.O. Box 326, Oakley, CA 94561. 925-420-6223.
Registrations@SFWriters.org
sfwriters.org

Santa Barbara Writers Conference

Santa Barbara, California, return TBD. Canceled in 2020, the conference says it is "postponed until it is safe for us all to meet in person." Writers in all genres from various countries gather in Santa Barbara to spend a week focused on story, voice, craft, marketing, and networking with fellow writers and publishing professionals. Has hosted legendary writers such as Ray Bradbury, William Styron, Eudora Welty, James Michener, and T.C. Boyle. **Contact:** Santa Barbara Writers Conference, 27 W. Anapamu St., Suite 305, Santa Barbara, CA 93101. 805-729-3368.
info@sbwriters.com
sbwriters.com

COLORADO

Aspen Summer Words

Aspen, Colorado, dates TBD. Last year's festival took place online, and organizers plan to announce plans for 2021 soon. One part literary festival, one part writing retreat, the Aspen Summer Words event is hosted by some of the nation's most gifted and engaging writers. Brings writers and readers together for author readings and talks, interviews and Q&As, writing workshops, and literature appreciation classes. Consultations also available. **Contact:** Aspen Words, 110 E. Hallam St., Suite 116, Aspen, CO 81611. 970-925-3122. aspenwords@aspeninstitute.org aspenwords.org

Northern Colorado Writers Conference

Lafayette, Colorado, April 24-May 1. Limited in-person spots available, with 40+ sessions available online. Keynote speaker: Jayne Allen. Closing remarks: Teresa Funke. **Contact:** Northern Colorado Writers Conference, 2770 Arapahoe Rd., Ste. 132-1110, Lafayette, CO 80026. 720-552-0054. april@northerncoloradowriters.com northerncoloradowriters.com/conference

Pikes Peak Writers Conference

Colorado Springs, Colorado, April 21-25. As of now, it is planned for in-person, but check website for updates. The annual conference held by the Pikes Peak Writers features informative workshops, motivational speeches, networking opportunities, read and critique sessions, and the chance to pitch your manuscript to industry editors and agents. **Contact:** Pikes Peak Writers, P.O. Box 64273, Colorado Springs, CO 80962. registrar@pikespeakwriters.com pikespeakwriters.com

CONNECTICUT

Wesleyan Writers Conference

Middletown, Connecticut, June

22-26, 2022. Welcomes new and established writers. Includes seminars, workshops, readings, panel discussions, and manuscript consultations. Many genres addressed and scholarships available. **Contact:** Shapiro Center for Writing 116 Mt Vernon St, Middletown, CT 06457. 860-685-2000. writersconf@wesleyan.edu wesleyan.edu/writing/conference

Yale Writers' Workshop

New Haven, Connecticut, dates TBD. Check website for updates. Workshops, individual conferences, discussions, and presentations. Includes opportunities to delve deeper into specific genres, including poetry, playwriting, historical fiction, and memoir. **Contact:** Yale Writers' Conference, 55 Whitney Ave., 4th Fl., New Haven, CT 06510. 203-432-2430. ywc@yale.edu summer.yale.edu/ywc

FLORIDA

SleuthFest 2021

Boca Raton, Florida, March 19-21 (virtual). Offers panels on the craft and business of mystery writing as well as agent or editor appointments. **Contact:** Sleuthfestinfo@gmail.com sleuthfest.com

GEORGIA

Blue Ridge Writers' Conference

Blue Ridge, Georgia, April 9-10. Check for updates on the website regarding COVID-19. This conference seeks to educate and inspire writers with feedback from writers, editors, and agents. Includes workshops on a wide range of topics. **Contact:** Blue Ridge Mountains Arts Association, 420 W. Main St., Blue Ridge, GA 30513. 706-632-2144. blueridgearts@gmail.com blueridgewritersconference.com

Savannah Book Festival

Savannah, Georgia. For 2021, the Fes-

tival is holding online events with authors throughout the year. Registration and small fees may be required for events. Past authors include Alice Hoffman, Stephen King, and Sandra Brown. **Contact:** Savannah Book Festival, 37 W. Fairmont Ave., #216, Savannah, GA 31406. 912-598-4040. info@savannahbookfestival.org savannahbookfestival.org

IOWA

Iowa Summer Writing Festival

Iowa City, Iowa. Providing Zoom sessions for the coming year. Offers a wide selection of workshops. Choose from fiction, poetry, nonfiction, writing for children, play/screenwriting, fantasy/science fiction, and "genre-benders." **Contact:** Iowa Summer Writing Festival, The University of Iowa, 24 Phillips Hall, Iowa City, IA 52242. 319-335-4160. iswfestival@uiowa.edu uiowa.edu/iswfestival

LOUISIANA

Tennessee Williams New Orleans Literary Festival

New Orleans, Louisiana, March 24-28. Check website for latest COVID updates. Created to honor the legacy of Tennessee Williams and support and nurture writers, actors, musicians, and other artists. **Contact:** Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival, 938 Lafayette St., Suite 514, New Orleans, LA 70113. 504-581-1144. info@tennesseewilliams.net tennesseewilliams.net

MASSACHUSETTS

Juniper Institute for Young Writers

Amherst, Massachusetts, July 26-30 (virtual). Check website for latest COVID updates. An eight-day creative writing program for high school students finishing their freshman, sophomore, or junior year hosted by the UMass MFA Program for Poets and Writers. Intensive workshops in

fiction and poetry, craft sessions, and studio courses designed for young writers. **Contact:** Juniper Institute for Young Writers, c/o MFA Program for Poets and Writers, South College, 150 Hicks Way, Amherst, MA 01003-9274. 413-545-8988.

juniperyoungwriters@hfa.umass.edu
umass.edu/juniperyoungwriters

The Muse & The Marketplace

Boston, Massachusetts, April 21-25. Check website for latest COVID updates. See more than 140 writers, literary agents, editors, and other publishing professionals present on a variety of different subjects, from craft to revision to publishing. Attendees can also take part in the “Manuscript Mart,” which provides 20-minute individual sessions with a literary agent or editor to provide professional feedback about your work.

Contact: Muse and the Marketplace, GrubStreet, PO Box 418, Arlington, MA 02476. 617-695-0075.

muse@grubstreet.org
museandthemarketplace.com

MICHIGAN

Bear River Writers’ Conference

Ann Arbor, Michigan, dates TBD. Check website for latest COVID updates. Workshops in poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction, as well as readings, discussions, nature walks, and time for writing. Staffed by the University of Michigan English department. **Contact:** Bear River Writers’ Conference, Dept. of English Language and Literature, 3187 Angell Hall, 435 South State St., Ann Arbor, MI 48109. 734-763-2342.

Bearriver-questions@umich.edu
lsa.umich.edu/bearriver

Rally of Writers

Lansing, Michigan, April 17. Check website for latest COVID updates. An annual one-day conference, featuring a keynoter and breakout sessions led by published Michigan authors in sev-

eral genres of writing, including fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, journalism, children’s books, and business matters. **Contact:** arallyofwriters@att.net
arallyofwriters.com

MISSOURI

AWP Annual Conference & Bookfair

Kansas City, Missouri, March 3-7, virtual. Writers, publishers, editors, and educators engage in conversation with fellow lovers of literature from across the region and the world. **Contact:**

The Association of Writers and Writing Programs, 5700 Rivertech Ct., Suite 225, Riverdale Park, MD 20737-1250. 240-696-8273.

registration@awpwriter.org
awpwriter.org

NEVADA

Las Vegas Writers Conference

Las Vegas, Nevada, dates TBD. Consists of a small group of writers attending pitch sessions, plus talks with faculty, workshops, seminars, and expert panels, as well as plenty of opportunities to meet and network with other writers, editors, and agents. **Contact:** Henderson Writers Group, PO Box 92032, Henderson, NV 89009.

confcoord@hendersonwritersgroup.com
lasvegaswritersconference.com

NEW HAMPSHIRE

Frost Place Conference on Poetry and Teaching

Franconia, New Hampshire, dates TBD. Brings together hard-working classroom teachers and highly skilled poets to share their experiences of how poetry is most effectively presented in the classroom. Graduate-level and continuing education credits are available through Plymouth State University. **Contact:** The Frost Place, 158 Ridge Rd., Franconia, NH 03580. 603-823-5510. frost@frostplace.org
frostplace.org

NEW JERSEY

Writers’ Conference New Brunswick

New Brunswick, New Jersey, dates TBD. Rutgers University’s annual conference was not held last year. The program is offering online webinars.

Contact: Summer and Winter Sessions, Rutgers Lifelong Learning Center, 3 Rutgers Plaza, New Brunswick, NJ, 08901. 848-932-7565.

writersconference@docs.rutgers.edu
ruwriterscon.rutgers.edu/nj

NEW YORK

American Society of Journalists and Authors (ASJA) Annual Conference

New York, New York, April 19-20. The ASJA annual conference focuses on independent writing and will help you succeed in a freelancing career. Learn how to market yourself to editors and agents and network with fellow writers and publishing professionals. Features over 50 sessions. Full schedule on website. **Contact:** ASJA, 355 Lexington Ave., 15th Fl., New York, NY 10017. 212-997-0947. asjaoffice@asja.org

asja.org

Colgate Writers’ Conference

Hamilton, New York, June 20-26. Readings, workshops, craft talks, and free time to write and explore the area. Hosted on the Colgate University campus. Highlights fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, and short story writing. Bring a work in progress. **Contact:** Colgate Writers’ Conference, Office of Summer Programs, 13 Oak Dr., Hamilton, NY 13346. 315-228-7760.

writersconference@colgate.edu
colgate.edu/community/summer-academic-arts-and-sports-programs/colgate-writers-conference

Gotham Writers’ Workshop

New York and online, various dates. One of the largest and most compre-

hensive private creative writing schools in New York City and online, Gotham offers classes in all genres in addition to seminars about selling work and private instruction. **Contact:** Gotham Writers' Workshop, 555 8th Ave., Suite 1402, New York, NY 10018. 212-974-8377. contact@gothamwriters.com writingclasses.com

New York State Summer Writers Institute

Saratoga Springs, New York, dates TBA. Hosted by Skidmore College and the New York State Writers Institute at the University of Albany. Features creative writing workshops in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. The staff is a group of prestigious writers and authors, some of whom have won honors such as the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Offers undergraduate and graduate credit. Enroll for two weeks or the entire session. **Contact:** NYS Summer Writers Institute, Office of Special Programs, Skidmore College, 815 N. Broadway, Saratoga Springs, NY 12866. 518-580-5593. summerwriters@skidmore.edu skidmore.edu/summerwriters

The Writer's Hotel Master Class in Fiction, Nonfiction & Poetry

New York, New York, dates TBD. Three classic Manhattan writers' hotels host panels, lectures, workshops, and agent speed dating. Editors read participant work beforehand. Writers can read their work at iconic literary venues. Last year's program was virtual. **Contact:** The Writer's Hotel, P.O. Box 472, Brunswick, ME 04011. editors@writershotel.com writershotel.com

SCBWI Winter Conference

New York, New York, February 19-21. Top professionals in the children's publishing world gather to

share knowledge and expertise. Speakers include award-winning authors and illustrators, agents, editors, and art directors. Topics include market trends, what is hot, what is not, and what they really want to see next. All genres are represented, from picture books and middle grade to young adult. **Contact:** Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. 323-782-1010. scbwi@scbwi.org scbwi.org/events/winter-conference-2021

NEW MEXICO

Left Coast Crime

Albuquerque, New Mexico, April 7-10, 2022. The 2021 conference has been canceled due to COVID-19. An annual event sponsored by mystery fans where readers, writers, librarians, and other mystery and thriller enthusiasts gather to share their mutual interest in the genre. Guests of Honor: Mick Herron and Catriona McPherson. **Contact:** Left Coast Crime. leftcoastcrime.org/2022/index.html

NORTH CAROLINA

Blue Ridge Mountains Christian Writers Conference

Ridgecrest, North Carolina, dates TBD. One of the largest Christian writing conferences in the country, it draws writers from across the nation and covers topics such as novel writing, nonfiction, screenplays, visual media, devotions, freelance, children's, magazine articles, and web content. **Contact:** Blue Ridge Mountains Christian Writers Conference. Email from website. blueridgeconference.com

OHIO

Kenyon Review Writers Workshop

Gambier, Ohio, dates TBD. May be in-person or virtual; check website for updates. Genre workshops are held for three hours every morning, while the afternoons are kept free for

writing and reading. Evenings include public readings from instructors, visiting writers, and workshop participants. Choose from poetry, literary nonfiction, fiction, spiritual writing, and translation workshops. **Contact:** The Kenyon Review, Finn House, 102 W. Wiggin St., Kenyon College, Gambier, OH 43022. 740-427-5204. writers@kenyonreview.org kenyonreview.org

PENNSYLVANIA

Highlights Foundation Workshops

Honesdale, Pennsylvania, dates vary, currently all virtual. Workshops geared toward authors interested in writing and illustrating for children. Intermediate and advanced levels led by children's publishing professionals, including editors, writers, art directors, publishers, and agents. See website for list of workshops. **Contact:** Highlights Foundation, 814 Court St., Honesdale, PA 18431. 877-288-3410. jo.lloyd@highlightsfoundation.org highlightsfoundation.org

Pennwriters Annual Conference

Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, May dates TBD. The conference offers more than 40 hours of workshops, panels, and genre breakout sessions. **Contact:** Pennwriters, Inc., PO Box 685, Dalton, PA 18414. info@Pennwriters.org pennwriters.org

Philadelphia Writers' Conference

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, dates TBA. The Philadelphia Writers' Conference is the oldest writing conference in the country with open registration. Optional master classes available in addition to workshops, peer critiques, and pitch sessions. **Contact:** Philadelphia Writers' Conference. wdwconference@gmail.com philadelphiawritingworkshop.com

The Write Stuff Writers Conference

Allentown, Pennsylvania, March 18-20. Check website for updates. The Greater Lehigh Valley Writers Group sponsors interactive sessions with industry-leading authors, editors, and agents. Agent/editor pitch sessions and flash fiction writing contests.

Contact: GLVWG.
glvwg.vebmeister@gmail.com
greaterlehighvalleywritersgroup.wildapricot.org

TEXAS

West Texas Writers' Academy

Canyon, Texas, dates TBD. This conference focuses on both traditional and self-publishing, and takes a non-traditional approach. Unique workshops include firearms training for crime writers to plotting a novel within a week. **Contact:** West Texas A&M University. 806-651-2037.
rplatt@wtamu.edu
facebook.com/westtexaswritersacademy

VIRGINIA

Virginia Festival of the Book

Charlottesville, Virginia, March 17-21. Festival of literary events honoring book culture and promoting reading and literacy. Mostly free and open to the public. Past presenters include Jason Reynolds, Laurie Halse Anderson, and Lisa See. **Contact:** Virginia Festival of the Book, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, 145 Ednam Dr., Charlottesville, VA 22903. 434-924-3296. vabook.org

WASHINGTON

Pacific Northwest Writers' Conference

Seattle, Washington, dates TBD. The conference's mission is to develop writing talent through education, accessibility to the publishing industry, and participation in an interactive writer community. **Contact:** Writers' Cottage, 317 NW Gilman Blvd., Ste. 8, Issaquah, WA 98027. 425-673-BOOK.

pnwa@pnwa.org. pnwa.org

WEST VIRGINIA

West Virginia Writers' Workshop

Morgantown, West Virginia, July 15-18. Attend workshops in poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction, in addition to a variety of other activities for writers. **Contact:** WVU Department of English, P.O. Box 6296, Morgantown, WV, 26506. 304-293-3107.
mark.brazaitis@mail.wvu.edu
english.wvu.edu/centers-projects/west-virginia-writers-workshop

WISCONSIN

Novel-In-Progress Bookcamp & Writing Retreat

West Bend, Wisconsin, May 23-29. Sponsored by the Chicago Writers Association, the Novel-In-Progress Bookcamp is for writers working on a novel or creative nonfiction book. Includes instructional classes, one-on-one consultations, group critique sessions, guest speakers, and special activities all focused on your work-in-progress. Hosted at a retreat center and spa in southeast Wisconsin. **Contact:** Novel-In-Progress Bookcamp. novelbookcamp.org

Write-by-the-Lake Writer's Workshop and Retreat

Madison, Wisconsin, dates TBD. Choose fiction, freelancing, nonfiction, or poetry and spend a week creating, exploring, and polishing your work with other dedicated writers. Graduate credit is available for an additional fee. **Contact:** Director Christine DeSmet, UW-Madison Liberal Studies & the Arts, 21 N. Park St., Madison, WI 53715. 608-262-3447.
christine.desmet@wisc.edu
continuingstudies.wisc.edu/write-by-the-lake

WYOMING

Jackson Hole Writers Conference

Jackson, Wyoming, June dates TBD. Share your work with other writers through critiques, workshops, and open mic nights. Also utilize the opportunity to discuss your work one-on-one with experienced authors, editors, and agents. **Contact:** Jackson Hole Writers Conference, P.O. Box 1974, Jackson, WY 83001. 307-413-3332. info@jhwriters.org
jacksonholewritersconference.com

Literature & Landscape of the Horse

Laramie, Wyoming, dates TBD. Check website for updates. A unique adventure for anyone who yearns for nature, longs to reconnect with horses, and hungers for creative inspiration in an authentic western ranch setting. Combines riding, writing, and reflection with guest facilitator Sheri Griffith. **Contact:** Paige Lambert. 303-842-7360.
page@pagelambert.com
pagelambert.com/horse_literature.html

INTERNATIONAL

Left Bank Writers Retreat

Paris, France, dates TBD. A group of less than eight writers gather in Paris' Left Bank for a week of workshops and tours. Genres include poetry, fiction, nonfiction, memoir, drama, and any other project that can benefit from the writing techniques of Left Bank Writers like Stein, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald. **Contact:** Left Bank Writers Retreat, P.O. Box 968, Jackson, WY 83001. 307-734-5335.
info@leftbankwriters.com
leftbankwritersworkshop.com

San Miguel Writers' Conference

San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, virtual. Going all online through March 2021. Includes events and workshops via zoom. See website for latest schedule. **Contact:** San Miguel Literary Sala. Email from website.
sanmiguelwritersconference.org

Classifieds

READERS should use caution when entering into any legal contract with a literary service offering agenting-type assistance; publishers who charge, rather than pay, an author for publication; publishers who require a purchase before publication and contests that charge high entrance fees. *The Writer* also recommends requesting a list of references and submission guidelines before submitting a manuscript. If you have any concerns regarding the advertiser's commitment or claims, please contact the advertiser and make certain all questions are answered to your satisfaction.

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CONTESTS

CALL FOR ENTRIES: 2021 Nelligan Prize for Short Fiction. \$2,000 awarded to author of winning story, plus publication in Fall 2021 issue of *Colorado Review*. Deadline is March 14, 2021. \$15 entry fee. Send SASE or visit website for complete guidelines. Nelligan Prize, *Colorado Review*, 9105 Campus Delivery, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523-9105. <https://nelliganprize.colostate.edu>

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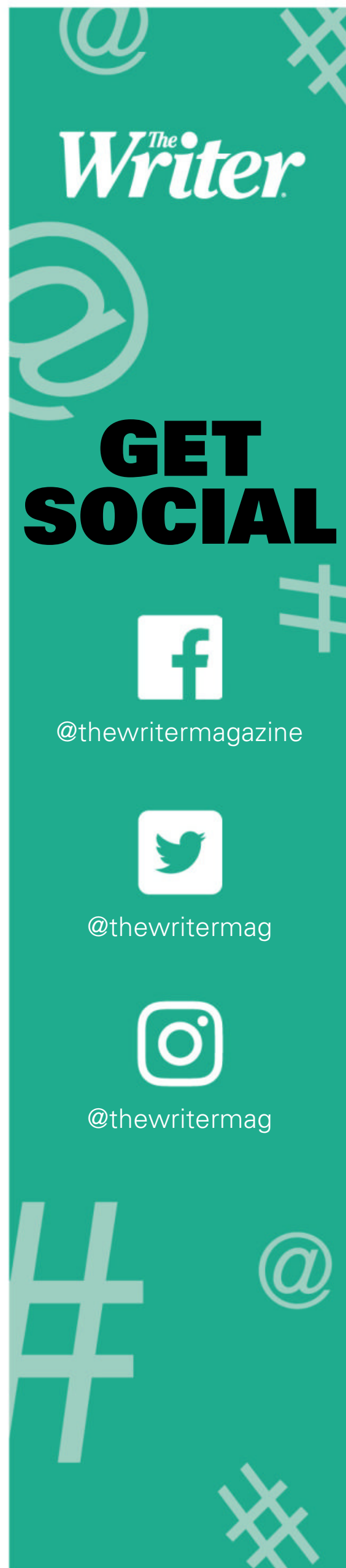
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Gigi Will Know

Have a query about craft? Need some clarification on an aspect of the publishing industry? Looking for career advice? Email your queries to tweditorial@madavor.com with the subject line "Advice Column."

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How does one find submission guidelines for nonfiction magazines? I've been looking up specific magazines online and can only find information about how to subscribe. (I am new at this.)

—FOOT IN THE DOOR

Dear Foot in the Door,

You say you're new at this, so I'm going to assume that you don't have the verbiage of this business down pat yet, either. Reading between the lines of your query, when you say "non-fiction magazines," you mean "consumer magazines," like you might find on the newsstands. Think *Newsweek*, *The Atlantic*, *Vanity Fair*, and *GQ*. These are also the publications whose guidelines are most likely to be difficult to find, which might explain your confusion. And – you're right! *Some* of these publications are also not likely to even post their guidelines.

Back in the day, you'd write to the magazine with a self-addressed stamped envelope, and the publication would reply to you with a sheet of guidelines.

Figure out which section you want to write for. Then determine what ideas you have that might work for those sections. Then craft a good query and send it off.

We did it this way because, back in the day, there wasn't so much content available for free from these very publications online, so folks weren't as likely to know what to submit for consideration without paying for an issue or three. Now, you can access articles from nearly all of the publications I've listed above for free, which makes it easier to know *what* to pitch.

In terms of *how* to pitch, many of these publications will list the email address or

the email protocol of the section editors. I'd start there. Figure out which section you want to write for. Then determine what ideas you have that might work for those sections. Then craft a good query and send it off.

Be smart. Target the right section. Understand what comprises a good query letter. You can also leverage tools like Sonia Weiser's wonderful Opportunities of the Week newsletter, which lists publications and editors looking for stories and

freelancers. (This is a paid newsletter, with good reason: Weiser works hard to collect and gather these opportunities. Twitter is free, though, and you may find editors looking for pitches there, too. Follow the editors of your favorite publications and keep an eye out for their calls for submissions.)

On the off-chance that you're actually looking for magazines that publish essays and creative nonfiction (*Creative Nonfiction*, *The Paris Review*, *Sweet Brevity*), these guidelines are readily available at places like Submittable or on the magazines' websites.

But before you do any of that, I'd nail down the lingo. "Nonfiction" magazines don't really exist. Consumer magazines that publish reportage and essays do, and so do literary magazines that publish memoir and creative nonfiction. "Submission guidelines" for the glossy magazines are slippery, but looking up "editorial guidelines" and "write for" might get you further.

Google loves you,
—Gigi



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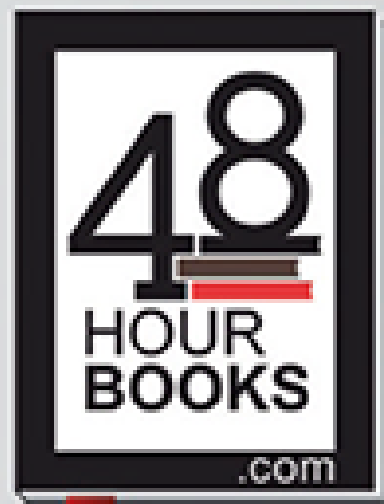
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