

Advice for New Writers of Crime Fiction
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I don't want anyone to think that after reading my bits and pieces of advice, a writer will know the rules. W. Somerset Maugham may have summed it up best:

There are three rules for writing the novel. Unfortunately no one knows what they are.

One of the aspects of writing that is most painful and most joyous is that one has to find one's own way. I hope you'll find these notes useful, but keep in mind that these are simply my own opinions, and you may find your own path takes you in a different direction.

The Quick Nine

1. Take a famous author to bed.

Read the best crime fiction you can lay your hands on, and read it as a writer: study how the work is structured, how character is revealed, how dialogue is written, how pacing is maintained. Ask, “How did this writer make me feel concern for the characters?” “What did this writer do to hold my interest?” “At what points in the story are clues given?” “Where are the reversals and obstacles the protagonist must overcome?”

2. Meet the new kids on the block.

Get to know what's being published, not to knock off a copy of a bestseller, but to have a sense of the range of the genre and the world in which you will be working.

3. Let old dogs teach you new tricks.

Study the classics of this genre. Learn why the best present-day writers mention favorites such as Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Ross Macdonald, Agatha Christie, and Dorothy L. Sayers, among a great many others. If you haven't read three works by each of the above, you've missed a chance to learn important lessons in writing crime fiction.

4. Learn from morons.

Study bad writers. Sometimes it's easier to see writing pitfalls you should avoid than it is to recognize those subtleties that combine to make great writing. Study the books you don't like. Ask yourself what went wrong with poorly written books.

5. Turn off the television. For eight months.

Spend more time writing. You never waste time by writing — you only waste time by not writing. Writing is not email, Facebook, research, meetings of writing clubs, writing groups, or writing classes. Alas, it's just writing. Do more of it, get better at it.

6. Be a lousy writer.

Go ahead, practice on the page. Be lousy. It's okay. You're learning a craft that is complex. Don't fret about being criticized or criticize yourself into paralysis. Let the fact that you will be able to revise free you to write your first draft.

7. Don't worry about the effects of inflation on the cost of a roundtrip ticket to the moon.

Don't think too much about being published. Being published can't happen until you finish at least one manuscript — probably more. Worrying too much about finding an agent while you write your first novel is like worrying about where you're going to park your spaceship. It's a problem for the future, and you aren't there yet. Your focus must be on writing the best book you can.

8. Fly high, and keep track of where the ground is.

Writing can be terrifying, and takes a lot of work, but there should also be joy in it for you. If not, and you're only doing it because you hope writing will get you out of your day job, you may find it easier to find some other career alternative. If you do enjoy it — despite all slings and arrows — try hard not to forget that you also have outrageous fortune if you can write. That's true even if you've yet to find your audience.

In those moments when the writing makes you feel that rush that keeps you at the keyboard, enjoy it to the fullest. Then remember that sometimes our most precious and beautiful prose may be the first sentences we need to cut in revision.

9. Get moving.

Talent is wonderful. It allows you to enter the race.

But that's all.

Commitment gets you to the starting line.

Persistence allows you to finish it.

With any luck, you'll also have resilience, and come to understand that there is more than one race to be run.

A few more tips

Should I outline?

This is a question akin to, “Should I write with my left hand or my right hand?”

I don't outline. I know other writers who don't. I know other writers who do. Some writers can't imagine writing without one, others shudder at the thought of writing with one. I can name lots of talented and successful people on either side of the question. The only people I disagree with are the ones who insist that there is only one approach.

So, if you're having trouble working with one method, try it the other way.

Why should I watch at least one early-in-the-season episode of *American Idol* — one featuring the initial cattle call auditions?

If you do, you'll note that this population of artists, like the population of writers, also contains a combination of misunderstood geniuses, mediocre performers who can't see what separates them from superstars, and a few truly talented individuals. You'll see that passion and dreaming is not enough. Sooner or later, you'll see an audition of some earnest someone who couldn't carry a tune if you gave them a skip loader to help them do it. This person will have family and friends who apparently believe the singer has real talent. This person will usually be angry as hell when the judges say no, talk about things being unfair, and so on.

For some reason, it is easier for writers to see the obvious when it isn't about writing — that some people who want to be on the cover of *Rolling Stone* will never get there, for example — than it is to see that simply liking the smell of your own prose may not get you on the bestseller list. Or published by a major publishing house.

If you keep watching the show, you'll also see that some amazingly talented people don't make it to the top, either — but that's another subject.

I don't say any of this to discourage you. Oddly enough, the truly talented often believe in themselves — just as fiercely as the utterly untalented.

So what's my point? There is only **one** thing over which any writer — whether best of the best or hopeless case — has real control: what's on the page. That's where you need to concentrate your efforts. Not in picturing what it will be like to quit your day job, envisioning how pleased (finally!) your family will be with you, or feeling smug about how sorry everyone who called you a loser will be when you're famous.

Save the future for the future. Concentrate on writing the best book you can write.

What books do you recommend for new writers and writers of crime fiction?

Writing Mysteries, edited by Sue Grafton, 2nd edition

Writing the Novel, by Lawrence Block

Telling Lies for Fun and Profit, by Lawrence Block

Bird by Bird, by Anne Lamott

The Art and Craft of Novel Writing, by Oakley Hall

and perhaps a copy of *Rotten Rejections*, edited by Bill Henderson and Andre Bernard, because sometimes a little Schadenfreude is good for what ails you.

What about writing groups? Should I join one?

This goes back to left-handed/right-handed. Some writers swear by them, some swear at them. Remember that going to a writers group is not writing. Remember that the people who are in them may have agendas that have nothing at all to do with writing better. At the end of the day, you are the one who must decide whether or not your work has worth. But if you find a group that works well together, and if it helps you to have this sort of group, perhaps this is a good way for you to begin.

Still, beware too many cooks, etc. And beware the “group expert,” the person who has a cookie-cutter plan for how a novel should work and wants to trim yours to fit it, who knows all the writing-class lingo, has taken every writing course known to humanity, and has read all the latest books on writing. You would be better off without this person eyeing your manuscript.

Sooner or later a writer needs to acquire the ability to evaluate his or her own work, to test his or her own ideas. You have to learn when it is and isn't working. You have to develop the ability to see that — if not immediately, then in revision. Decisions are made by a writer all along the process.

I prefer to do that evaluating and decision-making without a writer's group. While a few people who are close to me may read a work in progress, when it's time for overall manuscript feedback, I'm working with my editor. My editor is a highly skilled professional, and her comments are always thought-provoking and important to me. Ultimately, though, it must be my call — this is something she has always said to me.

When you are in the position of working with an editor at a publishing house, as I hope you will be, you can only make that same call if you've learned a few things on your own. The confidence a writer needs has to come from within.

I've finished a manuscript. What should every new writer with a manuscript know?

First, congratulations! Many people who want to write never complete a manuscript.

If you have it in the best shape possible, and are ready to seek representation, you will undoubtedly be excited and envisioning Big Things Ahead. That's fine. But know that there are industries and individuals who aim to make money taking advantage of the millions of people who dream of being published authors.

There are some wonderful people working as agents, people who legitimately earn money helping new authors. Alas, there is no "license" or other qualification needed to call oneself an agent, and some people who claim to be agents are not worthy of the name. How can you tell the difference between the legitimate representative and the con artist?

Every new writer (and experienced writer, for that matter) should visit the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA) Writer Beware site:
<http://www.sfwawriterbeware.org/for-authors/writer-beware>

I've put that in bold because I can't stress it enough. The information there is extremely important and will help you to be on guard against the less upstanding folks who hover around the edges of the industry.

What is Writer Beware? I'll quote its Mission statement:

Writer Beware is the public face of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America's Committee on Writing Scams. We also receive sponsorship from the Mystery Writers of America. Like many genre-focused writers' groups, SFWA and MWA are concerned not just with issues that affect professional authors, but with the problems and pitfalls that face aspiring writers. Writer Beware, founded in 1998, reflects that concern.

Although SFWA and MWA are US-based organizations of professional fiction authors, Writer Beware's efforts aren't limited by country, genre, or publication history. We've designed the Writer Beware website so it can be used by any writer, new or established, regardless of subject, style, genre, or nationality.

It's a complex site and it has information about many aspects of the publishing industry. Its volunteer staff works hard to keep it up-to-date. Take your time looking through it.

How can I meet other writers of crime fiction?

Three ways, for starters. In no particular order:

1) Join Sisters in Crime, Mystery Writers of America, and/or International Thriller Writers

Seriously consider joining at least one of these organizations. You can hear how other people went about getting their work published. These organizations have materials you can read. And as I've said above, you can buy a great resource about mystery writing edited by Sue Grafton, the MWA Handbook called "Writing Mysteries." I am an associate editor on it. (I don't get any money from the sales of this publication -- the proceeds go to MWA.)

ITW does not have chapters, but MWA and SinC do. Some (not all) chapters of these groups have mentoring programs. You can learn more about the organizations at

<http://www.mysterywriters.org>

<http://www.sistersincrime.org>

<http://thrillerwriters.org>

See the notes on conventions for other organizations that may help you.

2) Writing conferences and classes

Look for a writing conference like the one held every January at San Diego State University:

<http://www.ces.sdsu.edu/writersconference.html>

These are the important features that lead me to recommend it, and you should look for similar features in other conferences you consider:

- Well-established (this one was founded in 1984)

- Connected with a reputable institution or organization

- Offers an opportunity to meet with editors who are from major publishing houses and agents with established client lists

- Offers an opportunity to have pages of your work read

- Emphasizes teaching and has nuts-and-bolts workshops

(For all of these reasons, I also really like the one offered by Book Passage:

<http://www.bookpassage.com/mystery-writers-conference>

Every year, ITW sponsors Thrillerfest, which includes many tracks of interest to new writers. California Crime Writers, Sleuthfest and other MWA chapter sponsored events designed to teach.

If you take writing classes, look for instructors who really know the genre you write in, and try to talk to former students. If you encounter an instructor who makes you feel as if you no longer want to write, set a course 180 degrees away from him/her and start running.

3) Conventions

Mystery conventions are a great way to meet writers, including ones who have recently sold their works. They also provide a chance to learn about the world of crime fiction, and to hear mystery writers talk about writing. The biggest one is Bouchercon, usually held in the fall. (Google it for this year's location.)

Others, large and small, are Deadly Ink, Left Coast Crime, Malice Domestic, Magna Cum Murder.

RT Booklovers holds a huge annual convention that is largely focused on the romance genre, but has expanded over the years to include programming featuring many writers of crime fiction, science fiction, and other books. They usually offer a very solid set of workshops about writing crime fiction and getting published. If you are writing romantic suspense, you should consider this convention, and you should definitely join Romance Writers of America and attend their convention.

If you are writing children's or young adult mysteries, you will probably find more help from the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators than you will from any other organization. SCBWI also holds an annual convention.

If you are writing crime fiction that involves supernatural, futuristic, or fantasy elements, you should also consider membership in Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, and events and organizations that focus on those genres.

Should I self-publish?

At one time, my answer to anyone who wasn't terminally ill would have been an immediate "No."

I'm still not crazy about the idea, especially for new writers. I think one of the most balanced articles I've seen about it is on Writer Beware:
<http://www.sfwaworld.com/for-authors/writer-beware/pod/>

As for my own thoughts at present —

Here's the deal. If we're talking about self-publishing bound books, my answer is still an unhesitant "Don't do it." You won't be able to distribute or sell them as easily as you imagine. I have known a few hardy souls who juggled writing and the business of self-publishing, and after a few years, while a handful were successful, most of them were exhausted and broke. Don't try to do this without seriously studying what's involved. Again, go to the Writer Beware site.

Epublishing is another matter, mostly because it is changing distribution. But there is — despite the opinions you see touted by true believers in self-publishing ebooks — more to publishing houses than distribution. What is offered is also more than an individual

editor-for-hire (remember, you are the customer in this case, and that may affect the dynamic) or proofreader can bring to a book. Take some time to acquaint yourself with what a major publisher does for a book — most readers are unaware of this side of the business, and a good many writers are, too.

What impact e-publishing will have on what we read — and pay to read — remains to be seen. With everything so unsettled, how can you decide what to do if every agent you've queried turns your book down?

First, you have to figure out what you want.

Does that sound easy? It's not. Really think it out. Envision it. Want it.

Now, if the person in that vision is happy being e-published, and in all likelihood having low sales (instead of looking at the exceptions — and at people who have name recognition from celebrity or being published by the major houses — look at what happens to most unknowns), then go ahead and go to the expense and effort of being your own publisher. It may work out well for you. You may be part of a new trend.

But if the person in that vision wants to be published by the major houses, take a deep breath, remember that most writers do not sell their first manuscript, and get back to work. Write the next one. Do your best to figure out what kept that first one from selling, and work to improve what needs to be improved.

Your enemy is not the person who wrote the rejection letter. It's the voice in your head that tells you to give up. The complex skills required to craft a novel are seldom acquired in one go. Keep writing.

What we do is based not on publishing formats or changes in an industry. Publishing has been changing from the time the first book came into being. We tell stories. We were around before Gutenberg. What you are a part of when you tell a story is something so integral to who we are as a species, there's no need to worry yourself to halt when thinking about anything smaller.

Keep writing.