



## 'Best Practice' Author Techniques

### Seven Steps to Writing Success





## Step 1: Plan for Success

Ideas are like small plants sprouting in the compost of experience; it takes time and patience to find out if they turn into trees.  
(Shaun Tan)

I delineate the thinking and planning part of creating a story from the actual writing task. It might take me up to a month to get the idea and the plot outline. Once that is clear, then it only takes a couple of days to write it.  
(Paul Jennings)

I love the smell of a cooking idea in the morning.  
(Margaret Clark)

A book plan is like a skeleton. All the framework is in place, but you might not recognize the live result if you met it in the flesh. However, what would you be without a skeleton? (Clue - not a pretty sight...)  
(Sally Odgers)

The best place to start is with the characters... my best characters are part real world crossed with something unexpected... like the loud and obnoxious goldfish... often stolen from parts of my own character or that of someone I know... I am confident that once I have the character the rest will flow.  
Then sometimes it happens exactly the opposite way around. Idea first and then the character emerges.  
(Terry Denton)

There's thinking time and writing time. And re-writing time. I do about five-ten drafts. In between I'd be working on the five book lengths projects I average a year.  
(Hazel Edwards)

Anyone who can daydream can create a story.  
(Jackie French)

Stupid thoughts and absurd ideas that pop into your head are not necessarily so stupid or absurd. If something's not quite right, try adding tentacles.  
(Shaun Tan)



## Step 2: Sizzling Starts

The first sentence is the most exciting moment in the story, because I'm opening a door to the Wonderful Redolent Unknown. (John Marsden)

Stories have to hook the reader quickly. I sometimes rewrite opening scenes dozens of times. Dialogue often works as the reader is immediately aware of character. (Libby Gleeson)

Always cut out your first three paragraphs. They are only seeds for your mind to tend. Begin the story with the seedling instead. It's much stronger. (Rose Inerra)

I used to waste a lot of time trying to write the perfect first chapter of a novel. Then, months later, I found I would have to re-write it anyway. So now I just get going and come back to polish the beginning when I am finished the whole story.  
(James Moloney)

Often I scrap the first chapter and write the final version, last.  
(Hazel Edwards)

It's so hard to start, so I just start in the middle. Whatever I'm thinking goes onto the page. It may not end up as the beginning when it is all finished, but that is the way I have to start otherwise I never would.  
(Susanne Gervay)

If you can't think where to start a story, start anywhere - wherever it is most vivid.  
(Jackie French)



## Step 3: Tightening Tension

You don't fight dragons with languid sentences.  
(Garry Disher)

Every part of the story contributes to the dramatic tension. As tension increases, grammar and language change: sentences become shorter, words chosen are simpler. So I find these moments are rewritten and cut until they are right.  
(Libby Gleeson)

Sometimes I find myself sitting on the edge of my seat and panicking as I write tension scenes. 'Get a grip,' I tell myself, 'you're just making it up.'  
(Jen McVeity)

I don't plan tension scenes. They come out of characters having conflicts and events happening. I know they are successful when I cry or get angry or feel nervous inside as I write them.  
(Susanne Gervay)

Tension scenes need to move fast, but they also need elbow room. Don't skip over the details. Your readers want to know how the heli rotors flashed, what the bushfire smelled like, how the enemy looked close up and exactly how the giant insects clicked their feelers.  
(Sally Odgers)



## Step 4: Dynamic Dialogue

The best writers are great gossips and eavesdroppers: you need to learn how to watch and listen to write good dialogue.

(Jackie French)

I have arguments inside my head, then I write them down. Some of the arguments are pretty smart. Others sound like my kids when they are fighting.

(Susanne Gervay)

Dialogue makes characters come alive – without it they are merely names on paper with no motives, meaning or emotions.

(Jen McVeity)

With dialogue I always read it out aloud and come back to it the next day and do it again. In three reads you can iron out most of the rough bits. In fact that works for the whole story...try it.

(Terry Denton)

If you know your characters well, you'll hear them in your head.

(Garry Disher)

I prefer writing dialogue with a co-author, where we act it out and 'pace' the scene for humour.

(Hazel Edwards)

If you have 817 characters in your story, the bad news is you're going to need 817 different voices.

(John Marsden)

All my dialogue is pared to the bone. You have to. Anything over three lines the script editors cut out.

(Paul Jennings)

I love writing dialogue for my characters, it tells as much about them as their appearance. (Leigh Hobbs)



## Step 5: Show, don't Tell

Use the weather! Get it out of the sky and onto your page. Dark, brooding clouds ... close, steamy nights ... lightning flashes ... thunderclaps ... drumbeats of rain ... (Meredith Costain)

It is the ability to put ourselves in the place of another that makes us truly human. This is why stories are so important.  
(Paul Jennings)

Here's a simple thing to keep in mind: it's actions that display character. Don't tell me Mr. Jacobs is a mean man. Have him kick the cat and I'll figure it out on my own. Don't tell me Ronald is afraid, let him yelp in fear or dive for a hiding place. That way you've showed me he's afraid. Actions are the key to showing.  
(Bruce Coville)

Carry a notebook and constantly jot down ideas, images, bits of dialogue, bits of stories.  
(Margaret Wild)

Keep practising.  
Pretend you are really *living* in the story  
It helps to write about the kinds of people and places you know.  
(Emily Rodda – aka Jennifer Rowe)

In addition to interrogating my notes and ideas, I do research, enough to make the book seem true to life. The little touches are important: for example, a uniformed policeman has a chronic back pain from all the heavy gear strapped to his belt. At certain times of the year there are ibis and Pacific herons poking about on Peninsula farmland. A snooty woman from Brighton is rude to the local shopgirls. A service station displays photographs of cars that have fled without paying for petrol. Telling details like these can fix a setting and a scene in a reader's mind.  
(Garry Disher)



## Step 6: Ban the Boring

On average, I do ten drafts. I read it aloud to hear if I've introduced the character, problem and setting, fast.

(Hazel Edwards)

Strong plots are always my starting point. Look at the boring stuff we were brought up on, the John and Betty style books - they had no plot. I mean John always ran, Betty always skipped. I always wondered why they didn't fall down a well or something.

(Paul Jennings)

When you read through your work you will come to bits where instinctively you know it's not right... and your brain usually tells you don't worry... it's OK, no one will notice. Don't believe your brain... trust that first instinct and find out what's wrong and change it.

(Terry Denton)

If you're bored with your story, STOP! Rip it up and start again. If YOU think your story's boring, who else will like it?

Krista Bell)

Read your work aloud! This is the best advice I can give. When you read aloud you can find out how much can be cut, how much is unnecessary. You hear how the story flows.

(Judy Blume)

For the TV series Round the Twist, I wrote seven drafts of every script. I would do the same again. It's better to do another draft for nothing than to let a poor script go out.

(Paul Jennings)



## Step 7: Endings with Impact

I start a book when I know the first sentence and the ending - if the characters are 'alive', they'll take care of the middle.  
(Wendy Orr)

I write mysteries backwards. Ending first.  
(Hazel Edwards)

If you always have a question, there will be an answer and your ending.  
Don't ever finish a story with 'I woke up from a dream'.  
(Susanne Gervay)

Planning is the basis of every great project. A bridge has a plan, a house has an architectural plan, if you go on a holiday trip you need a destination. To write and satisfy your reader, you need a plan and know where you're heading. That's called an ending.  
(Jen McVeity)

An ending needs to be emotionally satisfying. A writer needs to keep the secret contract with the reader that all will be explained. 'it was a dream,' is a cop out.  
(Hazel Edwards)

I always have the ending defined well before I start. Any short story should have a wham at the end.  
(Paul Jennings)