

Build a Writing Team

G. M. Barlean

Less Traveled Roads Publishing

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Over the course of fifty-one years, I've pursued many different interests and have achieved many different goals. No awards. Nothing amazing. Just accomplishments I set for myself. I become interested in things and study to find out if they are things I can do. If I have a desire and ability to do them, I try to keep learning and see how far I can take the endeavor. It's a competition with myself more than anything. Apparently, I have something to prove to me!

In my thirties, I became interested in photography. I went to the library, checked out books, and read them cover to cover. I started a photography studio so I could experiment. I had to move as fast as I could to keep up with learning and growing as people in the community kept hiring me to take pictures. I owned and operated Barlean Photography for almost nine years. I had employees and many loyal customers who came to me from over a fifty-mile radius. The only education in this field was what I taught myself, but I did have a drive to succeed, a desire to prove I could do it, and a passion for the creative process of photography.

In my forties, I managed an opera house for several years. The non-profit board I worked for was trying to raise funds to renovate the property. I worked on fundraising efforts appropriate for the venue. I learned how to organize musical and entertainment programs that were well attended by people from surrounding communities. One effort I remember taking a lot of investigation and effort was to organize a concert of church choirs from all denominations in our county. Many different choirs came together to put on one big concert, where they shared Christmas music. I also began a series of Bluegrass music jam sessions. Through trial and error and many conversations with people who had done similar things, I learned how to work with bands, choirs, and solo artists, and I put on many different events, from fashion shows to flute concerts.

Another opportunity given me in this era of my life was the position of director of my community's Chamber of Commerce. This was a dive-in-or-drown situation, but, with the help of the board of directors and community volunteers, we not only kept the organization afloat, it thrived. As the Chamber director, I worked with the annually changing board of directors, volunteer

committees, community groups, schools, and businesses to create, continue, and assist many different community activities. We began a community auction, helped reenergize the area's annual parade, worked to begin a chili competition, and helped spearhead a fireworks celebration during the county fair. I worked with schools in the county to create a summer entrepreneurial education camp, and I helped organize and teach leadership classes offered by the University of Nebraska Lincoln's Rural Extension. The wealth of experience I gained in all of these endeavors taught me some valuable lessons.

First, I learned I can do almost anything I set my mind to, have interest in and skill for, provided I find great people to work with. It takes a team to do something big really well. I was only one part of the big things I've succeeded in—maybe the lead part, but still, just one of a great team.

There is only so much anyone can do on their own. I discovered in my small town, like so many others, there are smart, hard working, and talented people who, like me, want to do great things for the good of others and for the community. There are great people in the world who want to help others succeed.

Second, I learned doing things well takes hard work, countless hours, and a thick skin, especially if you are working with the public. In truth, I learned to have a thick skin during my photography studio years. Owning your own business is about hard work and drive. Being a business owner is not an easy job. It's 24/7, as they say. The responsibility is heavy and the hours are brutal, and any time money is exchanged for services, there can be issues. Communication is the key, and the better things are explained to the public, the easier transactions will be.

Now, writing books is my passion. I have written and published five books since I began pursuing my interest in writing. I learned how to be an author through networking, reading, classes, and asking as many questions as I could of people willing to share their knowledge. I now know many of the ins and outs of writing and publishing books. By becoming involved in groups, I've met individuals who have helped me to improve my writing skills. They introduced me to people and told me insights into the business. Now, I am ready to pay it forward and share what I know.

The Story of Telling

Wild deer charge through grass and trees, their eyes wide and frightened, their ears pricked to every noise. Men clothed in animal skins crouch low as they follow. Filthy from sweating in the heat, the men have hunted these deer for miles. This is their last chance for meat today. They are hungry.

Spears hover at shoulder height—grunts, and motions are used to communicate as the men surround the exhausted prey. The killing spear flies through the air between the underbrush and tree limbs. The spear hits a deer and the hunt is won. They drag the kill back to their tribe. Tonight, they will eat because they were a strong team of hunters. Their people will survive another day.

Later, the tribe sits by the fire, sated from the meal, and glowing with the grease of the feast on their faces. One of the men gestures, acting out the capture of the animal just devoured. Deep in the cave, another man scratches the scene on the cave wall, his only light the glow of the dancing flames from the fire just beyond the entrance. He brushes away the tangled hair hanging in his eyes as his sharp stone etches figures of deer and men with spears.

Twenty-five to thirty thousand years ago, human beings told stories on walls, on rocks and eventually parchment. They drew pictures of hunts for animals as a way to communicate the meaning of their lives. Early man used gestures, expressions, and song and dance to tell of battles, places, and things to fear. His tribe sat around the fire listening and learning. Then the people retold the stories to the next generation.

Stories to entertain and educate continue to pass from generation to generation about family, myths, and legends.

From cave walls to clay, parchment paper to books, and now films to digital and audio; the story will always exist and someone will always tell it.

But to whom?

To others, of course. To groups. To the entire human race if they're willing to read it.

Petro glyphs were more than just an expression of art. It was communication. Something we all do to connect with others. The need to tell others what we think comes directly from needing acceptance. Why record our lives, our history, or our adventures at all if we aren't attempting to create a bond with others?

Now we tell our own stories. We tell them at the dining room table, about funny things that happened at recess, work, or the gym. Some stories are told on blog posts, or in podcasts. Many of us yearn to write a book and share ideas and lessons we've learned in our lives. All of these things are done in hopes of an audience—a group—who will nod their heads and say, “Yes, that makes sense to me.”

We writers like to think what we do is an artistic and solitary thing. It is, to a point. But in the end, we must look beyond ourselves. We must be in touch with what readers want to read, with history and facts, with technology and the craft of writing. We need a group, not just to hear the story, but also to help us think it through. We must build a team just like early man built a team to help him hunt, and every member of the tribe had a role in the hunt's success. Some heard the story, others passed it on, and some wrote it in the only way they could—carved in the stone of a dark cave wall.

I believe we are all better writers if we find people to help us achieve our goal. Like a pack of wolves work together to hunt, or a flock of birds flying in V-formation, or like a school of fish cutting through the waves of the ocean, we are stronger in groups. It's an instinct we should embrace.

To make our work as good as it can be, we can cooperate, using each other's talents to get our stories out into the world so others can hear them. By sharing ideas and helping correct each other's errors, and brainstorming plots and scenes, we create something greater than we can create alone. Together we can then "sit around the fire" and feast on our success.

The most important part of the group we build as writers, are readers.

It's like the question, "If a tree falls in the woods, does it make a sound?" We can turn that question into, "If a story is never read, does it have any meaning?"

Only to the author, I suppose, but few authors I know write stories without hope of them being read.

When we work with others to make our writing the best it can be, we become as strong as the team we build. My goal with this book is to show you how to take this idea of team mentality, even in this solitary event of writing, and master the hunt.

And what is the largest game hunted? The great story hiding inside us all.

CHAPTER ONE—WHY WORK IN SMALL GROUPS

Team building is something we do more often than we realize. We do it when we create a family and when we create friendship groups. We've been building teams since we were children, working together to drive matchbox cars down imaginary roads on the carpet with our cousins. We pretended to be jungle animals as we ran around outside roaring and charging each other. It might have been the idea of just one of the kids to play the game, but when everyone joined in, it became a memorable childhood moment.

Ideas and creations can, and often do, come from individuals, but once a group becomes involved in that idea, it grows. When others join in a positive way to offer suggestions, or new views on an idea, it's like water and fertilizer to a budding flower.

In the business world, we often talk about networking. I remember hearing this term for the first time back in the 90s and wondering what it really meant. Humans love buzzwords and catch phrases. We seem to have a need to create new ways to look at old ideas.

"There is nothing new under the sun," Ecclesiastes tells us.

Networking is:

- Making friends
- Making connections
- Making contacts

In today's world, forming groups, networking, and social interaction can all be done with technology: websites, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn, and for authors, sites such as KBoards, and Critique Circle. We don't even have to leave our homes to be social butterflies...

But we should.

Why network?

- Face-to-face communication creates a sense of responsibility to others.
- Connections made in person can be more binding than email or Facebook connections.
- Being with others is real and has sound, visual, and smell... hopefully good smells.
- You can reach out and shake a hand or give a hug.
- You can hear a person's laugh and see their expression.
- Networking with people in person simply feels more real.

I know. It's easier for those writers who might be introverted to say they'd rather make friends online. I completely understand. I will admit I am a loner. I could live in a cabin up in the mountains all by myself... right up until I had to dig out of a blizzard. Then I'd have to come back down to civilization because that sounds like way too much work for me!

Seriously, I would always rather just make my own decisions and do what I please. And when it comes to decisions that just affect me, I still believe it's a dandy code to live by. Do I want the yellow shirt or the blue shirt? I don't need to call anyone in to make that decision. I'll get the blue shirt because it's the one I like best. Where should I hang a picture in my house? I certainly do not need to have several people give me ideas. I can work those things out on my own. But when it comes to decisions that affect others, over the years I have learned it is important to seek opinions of those who know more than I do.

I couldn't make a decision about my child's fever or enduring cough without consulting a doctor. Dentists, barbers, teachers, and coaches—my children deserved informed decisions made with suggestions from people more knowledgeable about those topics.

Your book is your child. It is your creation. You brought that story into this world, raised it, and, ultimately, you want to send it out for others to enjoy. Just like with real children, it's important to raise your baby in a way the world will like him or her. If you don't help your "child" blend in with society, you end up with an "adult" who can't function in the world.

As the parent of your book, it's your job to make sure it's ready for the great big world. If you don't fix issues others have with your "baby" you'll hurt it in

the end. If a parent laughs and thinks it's funny when their kid beats up on his classmates at recess, instead of telling him it's wrong, that child will not be well liked. In a writer's case, if a book parent... an author... rolls his eyes and ignores everyone who tells him he has to hire an editor to correct his grammar mistakes, then his book will not grow up to be very popular either. Raise your book right! It really does want to be a good book, but it needs your guidance and control. Okay. Enough similes for today.

So, as far as your book goes, you must bring in others to help you see what the story needs. You may be too close and love it too much to see its problems with your own eyes. Your grammar might be impeccable, but maybe you have some adverb issues. Yes, your humor is spot on, but maybe spelling isn't your forte. You might be doing too much telling and not enough showing.

I know, I know... a "parent" wants to love their "child" unconditionally. But good parents know part of loving children is raising them in a way the rest of the world will love them, too. If you don't raise a great book that is easy to love by many, you really haven't done your job.

Summary:

We naturally form groups to get work done. We do this by making friends. Now, it's possible to network online, but we mustn't forget the value of personal contact. Your book is your creation, very much like a parent to a child. Good parents know they have to rear a child the world will love. In the same way, authors must raise their books with the idea of readers loving it. The best way to do this is by socializing our books, and ourselves, in groups.

CHAPTER TWO—CONTACT AND ASSOCIATION

Big name authors such as Stephen King or James Patterson have agents they can turn to at any step of the process. Editors, publishers...all at their beck and call. Cover artists, formatting specialists, publicists, and marketing people wait to assist the "Kings" of the writing world.

Me? Not so much.

I do not have agents and publicists fluttering around me, helping to answer any questions or meeting my needs. I must rely on my own abilities to make real friends and business associates, create buzz and marketing for my books, and make quality connections so I can become known as an author.

We are never done learning. I enter every new venture of my life under the assumption I don't know a thing. This kind of humility helps me grasp for the information I need. Be hungry for knowledge and humble enough to know you need it. I'm still craving more information about writing, publishing, and marketing. I will always have a desire to meet new people in the writing industry, and because this industry is ever changing, I will never be done learning. There will always be new books to read about craft, techniques, and industry. There will always be more conferences to attend, and connections to make. Making connections is what joining writing groups is all about.

As the membership chairperson for the Nebraska Writers Guild, I wrote an article for the Nebraska Library Commission's, Center for the Book. In the article, I quoted Bess Streeter Aldrich, one of the founders of the NWG, as having said, "Contact and association help struggling writers, and such assistance should be given them."

—Bess Streeter Aldrich, Nebraska Writers Guild Account

She's talking about getting out and rubbing shoulders, making friends and acquaintances, learning from each other, and sharing what we know.

Of course, in Aldrich's day (1881 — 1954), there was a limited choice of how to do that, such as letter writing, telephone, or actual group interaction. In this day and age, we need not ever leave our easy chairs to socialize. I suggest we ignore such introverted tendencies and our deep desire to remain in pajamas all day. Let's cut the cord and leave the womb.

But where do we go to meet other writers, and what will we do there? These are reasonable questions many new writers ask.

So, how did I find a physical group to help me find other writers? Google, of course.

This wasn't my first rodeo, as they say, whoever they are. In the past, I'd started other hobbies and careers, and had to learn the ropes. I did it by reading books, taking classes, and meeting people in the areas of my interest.

I learned I had to get out and meet others of my species—people with interests similar to mine. People with avid interests tend to form groups. Small groups, medium sized groups, formal groups, and casual groups of people who enjoy the same things. They get together and "talk shop." For instance, my husband loves old Jeeps. He participates in a Jeep forum online, and plans to attend a Jeep gathering in Colorado this year. I suppose they'll all look at each other's Jeeps and talk about where to get parts.

Interested in something? Join a Group.

If you want to learn more about religion—join a church.

If you love to take pictures—see if there are photography clubs or classes in your area.

Love to go camping? There are entire organizations and websites you can visit to trade information about everything to do with camping.

Railroad enthusiast? There's a group for that.

Hunting, fishing, skiing, travel, wine lovers—if a group of people has an interest in, or a passion for, something, there is more than likely a group.

We're all looking for people who like the same things we do because we fit in. It's great to find people similar to you. So, if you want to meet other writers, there most certainly are writer's organizations, clubs, small groups, critique groups, generative writing groups, reading groups, and this list is as varied as the different types of writers there are in the world.

My Google search led me to Nebraska Writing Organizations. The first link on the list was The Nebraska Writers Guild. I joined, and it was like an arrow snapping from a bow. The arc of my writing story began.

Summary:

There is always more to learn. Famous authors have business networks provided by their publishing houses and agents. Small authors need to create them. People with similar interests naturally form groups. Joining a group may be the impetus to launch your writing career.

CHAPTER THREE—JOINING GROUPS CAN BE DIFFICULT

"I'm shy! I'm a loner, an introvert, agoraphobic, have a third eye... you know, that kind of thing."

Joining a group can be hard for some of us. Writing organizations often host writing conferences. These events generally provide speakers, workshops, or classes. Members have the opportunity to meet, network, form relationships, and learn as much as they can about the craft and business of writing. Networking is often what frightens us the most. Why is that? Writers often have introverted personalities. I know I do, and many of my writing friends claim the same affliction... or virtue, depending on how we choose to look at it.

Writing is a solitary activity, occurring somewhere in the nerves and muscles between the writer's brain and their fingertips. A story, true or fiction, is a thing created by an individual. It should be noted, introverts are not necessarily shy as much as they are more comfortable being alone. We work well by ourselves, which is perfect for being a writer, but this also means joining groups can be daunting.

If you start searching for information about introverts, you will find no shortage. I would highly recommend reading C. Hope Clark's book, **The Shy Writer Reborn**. She has great tips on how to overcome nerves when speaking or meeting new people, and many other tips about writing and publishing.

If you are an introvert, you can work to overcome the fear of group activity. I, for instance, need extra down time after a group meeting. For me, being an introvert means I refuel alone. Being in a group is draining as opposed to invigorating. But it doesn't mean I can't be in a group. Overcoming fear is part of many areas in life. Flying is a fear I struggle with, but I'm glad I have worked to overcome it. That helicopter ride over Kauai, Hawaii, was worth it.

Every time we meet others, we have an opportunity to learn and an obligation to share information about our craft and our business. This process helps us evolve as writers. It's that simple.

Of course, if the third eye really is a problem, stay home and do it online, but by all means, you should still be seeking out some kind of group connection. Being known as a writer helps you sell books.

Make Friends

Often at conferences and seminars, I see people hanging around in safe little cliques. I want to urge you to get to know a few additional people beyond your comfort zone. Even if you only make one acquaintance and ask them a few simple questions, you'll be far better for it. (Even if what you learn by meeting someone is that you want to avoid that person in the future!)

Consider conference time an opportunity to network. You spent money to be there and it's your writing career. Nobody cares about your career as much as you do, so grow it. You should assume every person in attendance may have something to teach you or some way to help you, either by promoting you, reading your work, or connecting you with someone they know.

Introductions

I know you don't want to hear this, but no one should have to hold your hand and introduce you to people. You are an adult. Just walk up to someone and introduce yourself.

Why introduce yourself?

A "hello," starts most friendships.

You have nothing at all to lose from meeting someone new.

It won't kill you...unless the person is dressed like the Grim Reaper and holding a scythe. Then you may have a bigger problem on your hands—especially if you're the only one who sees him!

It's true. Introductions can be messy. I completely understand how incredibly difficult they can be, especially for shy or introverted people.

I will offer this suggestion. I have often introduced people to each other at meetings. Maybe you can find someone who will do that for you. And maybe someday you can do it for someone else who is new.

If you can't find a host to introduce you, there is a mindset I use in these situations. I have found when going into an intimidating circumstance such as introducing myself to a new person, it is easier to do if I focus on their experience, more than about how I feel. What I'm saying is, don't be self-absorbed.

Don't wonder, Will they like me? Am I good enough?

Think, instead, How can I affect them positively.

Smile. Be nice. Only the most awful people will react poorly to kindness and you may want to avoid that type of person, anyway! Once we focus on others and not on ourselves, meeting people, attending new events, and public speaking, become much easier. For me, it's still hard to do the public speaking part... but this mindset of feeling responsible for how the audience feels does make it easier.

Another thing I would caution is, do not sell yourself when you meet someone. It has seemed over the years as though I had to "pitch" to everyone I met, so they understood I really and truly was an author!

Just like we are taught about social media—If all we say is, "Buy my book, buy my book, buy my book!" people will think of us like used car salesmen, not as a friend or someone to respect in the field. It's the same when we talk to friends we meet at conferences. "I write books, buy my books, my books are great, let me go on and on about my books and never even as much as ask you about your books!"

Yeah. I want to spend a lot of time with that person... not!

Remember these three things.

- People want to buy a book from someone interesting and genuine.
- No one likes a pushy sales person.

- If you are so enamored with yourself, why would anyone else need to be?

Think of times someone has approached you and launched into a diatribe about themselves and their books. Didn't they come off as self-involved and arrogant bores? You will be so much further ahead to approach someone with genuine curiosity about who they are. Every relationship is a two way street.

Just because you're doing well as an author might make you think, "I don't need a group." But has it occurred to you the group might need you? When you change your focus from what can the group do for me, to what can I do to help others, you will see a benefit. People will respect you, appreciate you, talk well of you to others, and you will end up being very surprised how much you learn from teaching others.

How to introduce yourself:

"Hi, I'm Gina. Are you an author?" This seems an obvious way to start a conversation at a writing conference. In a normal situation, that person will answer in kind. If they are a writer, you can then ask what kind of books they write, where they are from, and if they have published.

It can be a quick conversation, but the main idea is to establish a connection. You may be able to chat with them later in the day, sit by them at lunch, or at a workshop. I'm not saying everyone you talk to must become your best friend. I'm saying, open yourself up to meeting others and knowing as many other writers as you can. Make sure other people know you and remember you as a nice and helpful person. You won't make a connection with everyone you meet, but if you find one person you have common interests with, you may find a true writing friend.

Keep in mind, the person you choose to introduce yourself to may not have the best social skills. They may not think to ask you the same questions you've asked them in return. It's okay.

Remember, you're in the mindset where you're only worrying about how they feel. They are probably nervous. They may be shier than you are! Just smile and move on if they have nothing to say or appear as though they might faint if you continue to talk to them. You still benefited because you now

know something about one person and you have created a connection, albeit a one-sided one. Don't discount this. Maybe later in the day or even at the next conference, that same person will come up and ask you some questions. It just takes some people a long time to process things.

So don't sit and think, "Why me? Why do I have to go start the conversation? Why can't they come to me? Well sure, they could and they might. That would be nice. We can hope for it. But goodness, don't waste an entire convention hoping it will happen. This is your business, your career. Go out there and make sure you learn as much as you can about the topics being discussed and the other people in your field.

Think like an entrepreneur.

You are at a conference or group to learn new information.

All of these people have information from which you may benefit. Maybe it will be as small as them introducing you to someone they know who will end up becoming your very good friend.

It's your job to learn as much as you can because you paid to be there and it's your career.

Get your money's worth. If you only want to sit in on the classes and quietly listen, that's fine, but you really aren't getting your money's worth and you will miss out on the best part of what conferences offer—friendships.

Summary:

Introverts need to overcome their fear of joining groups. It's up to you to introduce yourself to others and make connections. Don't discount those you meet who aren't immediately receptive, because they are probably also introverted. Remember, this is your career, your investment, your opportunity to learn and grow. Focus on the other person's experience more than your own to alleviate your shyness.

CHAPTER FOUR—HOW GROUPS HAVE HELPED ME

So, we've talked about how networking is as simple as making friends. The old saying is true, after all—"It's who you know."

Here are examples of how conferences have created networks and opportunities for me.

First, I joined the Nebraska Writers Guild. I dove right in and met other writers. I started drinking from the common cup of knowledge. At my first conference, I met several people I maintain friendships with and for whom I have great respect. Some of those friends have become my beta readers and people who have advised and mentored me as well as helped promote my books.

Not quite a year after joining the Nebraska Writers Guild, I attended a Guild event called Write Across Nebraska. I met author, Charlie Volnek. We had things in common, and she invited me to attend a newly formed writing group in a town near my home. I attended, and then became friends with some of those writers.

This new group of friends decided to create a writing critique group and called it, The Local Muse. It has existed now for almost three years and I don't see it dissolving any time soon. We are all great friends and are each other's sounding boards for writing and life. We share each other's joys and troubles. I will tell you more about how our group works later, but know this—I would never have been able to get my first book or the next four written and published if not for the support and advice of my Muse sisters.

Through this newly formed critique group, one of the people I've become close friends with is New York Times bestselling author, **Victorine Lieske**. She has not only taught me endless amounts of information about writing, but she has also helped me learn about e-publishing. I would be a league behind in my career if it weren't for Victorine and all of the others in my critique group.

Through Victorine, I was invited to speak at the International Business of Writing Summit in Kentucky, which is what led me to write this book.

You see, it's like a snowball growing as it rolls down the hill. The more people you meet, the more chances you make to advance your career, provided you are open to opportunities.

I assure you, if you leave your writing nook and join a group or go to a conference and utilize your time to make friends, it can pay off. Be patient, persistent, and open to new relationships. Cast a line into the waters and see what you reel in. Remember, you're fishing for friends who will help you in your profession, and friends you can help in return.

With little more than purposeful chatting, I've found:

- Beta readers (second readers—I'll discuss this in a future chapter.)
- Advanced readers (ARC readers—to be discussed in a future chapter.)
- Traded books
- Found speakers for events
- Organized participation for author book signings
- Been invited to writing groups

By attending the Nebraska Writers Guild conferences, I've met authors from other states, such as C. Hope Clark. She invited me to write an article for her Funds For Writers Newsletter. This was a wonderful opportunity for me to introduce myself to thousands of new readers.

Through writing groups, I've had opportunities to attend book fairs and sell my books. The more people I meet and the more I get involved, the bigger my opportunities grow.

Summary:

In the end, it really is who you know. By meeting one person, you meet another, you have another opportunity, which leads you to another. But, don't just consider them contacts and connections. Make sure you make a friend.

CHAPTER FIVE—BUT, I AM AN ARTIST!

I'll bet I almost have you convinced to look into joining a writing group. You've come around and are thinking, Maybe I will be able to write a better book with the input of trusted writing friends.

But then you realized who you really are.

You stood up and proclaimed in a French accent, "BUT, I AM AN ARTEEST!"

A true artist doesn't ask others for their opinions! An artist creates because they are—GENIUS!

Uh... okay. Sit down. Try to deflate your ego.

I'm going to break something to you and you may not like it. Even Leonardo da Vinci needed patrons and connected with other influential thinkers and artists before he sold his art. Stephen wouldn't be "the King" if he hadn't worked his tail off making connections in the world of writing. Don't you think Brad Pitt got to know anyone-and-everyone he could so he could soak up every detail of acting? PaLEEZ. People who succeed work for it.

The truth is, very little any of us ever do in this world, is done without the help of others.

- Even if you sat down, all alone, and wrote a book
- Then edited it by yourself
- Formatted it
- Created a cover
- And published it on Amazon...

... You would still need a computer or paper and pen to write the story. Now, come on. I know you didn't invent the computer, paper, or pens. Other people made all of the things we require to do the "solitary" endeavor of writing.

We can never take complete and total credit for anything in life if we really start to think about it. And that's okay! Humility is a very good thing. Pride is a lot of work, and not usually such an attractive quality.

In the end, you're not even the most important part of the equation when it comes to writing a book. Does that surprise you? It's true. The reader is the most important part of your book. Writing can be a therapeutic and fun hobby, but selling books requires a writer's determination and plan to reach readers. You will need other people in order to become a successful writer, one way or another.

But don't worry. When we get too big for our britches, the world tends to smack us down. No one enjoys a braggart or a know-it-all. So, give credit to those who help you along the way. Doing this will glean your friend's continued support, and that's worth more than any advertising you can buy.

Hopefully, you are beginning to see it really does take a village to raise a book. Once you embrace this idea, the process will become far more streamlined. Yet, no matter how many people help you, in the end you are still the master of your creation. You are the one who will make the big decisions about your book.

Think of yourself as the project director. Maybe you're like the little red fish on the cover of this book, swimming at the front—your idea is setting the course. Even if minions are helping you, you still must write a great book to be a big seller. This is what makes you the most important part of the team. You and you alone can write your book. Your team will support you, but they can only support as much talent as you have. You'll also find, if you have no talent... you won't be able to find good supporters. You'll have to throw a tantrum just to find a person to read your work.

Remember This:

- You must write a great book!
- It's survival of the fittest out there.
- You're competing against the best.
- Bring everything you've got to the table.
- You may very well be an artist, after all. The question is, do you want to make money, or be a "Starving Artist"?

Summary:

Even though as an artist, you have the idea, you still won't want to do everything by yourself. We're all in this together. Humility is something we need to strive for. In the end, the reader is the most important part of a book. Without the reader, it's just words on paper. Let people help you, and then give them credit. It takes a village to raise a book.

CHAPTER SIX—GET INVOLVED

My first motive to join a writing organization was skewed. I was far more self-centered than I should have been. I wanted to know what the group could do for me. As a new writer, I thought all I needed was for someone to explain how to find an agent and how to get a publisher. This type of naïveté is common of new writers. I was quite sure my writing was great...I just needed a little direction in how to get it published. And, by golly, my Guild dues owed me that information!

Albert Einstein said, "Strive not to be a success, but rather to be of value." I love that. It really is the secret to a productive and, in my opinion, successful life.

Ways to be of value:

- Spread the wealth.
- Help others and people will think of you in a positive way and consider you a person who is knowledgeable in your field.
- The people you help may be willing to help you at some point in the future.
- Don't share information so you can call in favors. Do it because you want to return a favor once done for you.

To get as much benefit from a group as possible you need to remove the idea the group is there to do everything for you.

That's not how entrepreneurs think and you, my writing friend, need to get into the entrepreneurial mindset. The world is your oyster but you must shuck it. People will not stumble up to you at a writing conference and say, "Hey, you look like you need a mentor. Can I be that person for you? I'll answer all of your questions and get you started on the right path... even connect you with important people. How would that be?"

Yeah. That would be great, but no, Grasshopper, that is not how it works. Nor should it! We always appreciate things we earn more than things we are given. If you aren't willing to work for the knowledge you gain, how will you ever really understand the very competitive world of writing? Believe me, there are thousands of writers out there working their tails off. That's who you're

competing against. You'll have to work just as hard as they are if you want to be a contender.

You must always be making relationships and remember it takes two. You cannot be the one always taking; you must also give. In the most obvious and simplest breakdown of a relationship, you simply have to be nice! Get in the sandbox and share your toys. No one likes the kid who grabs everyone's stuff, or brings the best toys, but won't share. Remember, we are all trying to meet our basic needs; it's not just about you. There must be a give and take in relationships, or the one who is always giving will eventually cease to be generous.

Service is an opportunity

The first time someone asked me if I would like to participate in a service "opportunity," I was far too young, impatient, and quick-tempered for the question. You remember being young? Maybe you still are. It was a time when I thought I knew everything. I didn't.

When I was offered this "opportunity" to serve I remember thinking, Don't insult me. You want me to work and you actually think by telling me it's an opportunity, I will consider it a benefit of membership!

Turns out, it really was a benefit of membership.

- Free advertising.
- Free association with a respected group.
- Free face time with the public.

I'm older now and have been a member or leader of many volunteer groups. I realize serving an organization truly is an opportunity to make a name for yourself.

I've worked with non-profit groups. I understand when leading an organization, the board, and committee chairs cannot do all of the work. These people are not paid. They're volunteers just like all of the members. If an organization wants dues to remain reasonable, they must step up and help. A non-profit board can only accomplish so much, without member assistance.

It has been my tenet, if I see a need for a project, I don't say a word about it without a willingness to say, "I will help." There really aren't many things as irritating to board members who are volunteering their precious time, than when a member comes up and says, "You know what you ought to do!" or asks, "Why aren't you guys doing this?"

Be the change you want to see.

Help out, or at minimum offer, "I'd like to be part of creating a mentoring program in this organization." An open-ended idea with an offer to participate may trigger real conversations and even generate excitement. Most boards are thrilled to see members put together efforts to reach organizational goals, and will help them get a project going.

Remember how I said it's not just about gleaning information from those you know, it's also about sharing it? Trust me, when you share knowledge and talents with others, there will be something in it for you. It's called respect and credibility.

Summary:

Be of value. Help others and they may help you. Serving really is an opportunity if it gives you face time with your potential customers, and association with a good group. Everyone needs to pitch in and help if a project is going to have great success.

CHAPTER SEVEN—TYPES OF WRITING GROUPS

There are as many different kinds of writing groups, as there are writers.

- Some writing groups focus on learning the craft of writing.
- Some groups concentrate on poetry.
- Some get together to write screenplays.
- Some groups mentor young writers.
- Then there are large support organizations, such as the Romance Writers of America, Sisters in Crime, or The Nebraska Writers Guild, to name a few. These are the places people generally meet to form those smaller groups.

In this chapter, I will focus on two types of writing groups, which normally have a smaller number of members.

These two groups are:

- Generative Writing Groups
- Writing Critique Groups

Generative Writing Groups

Last year I read a great book about Generative Writing Groups by two author friends of mine, Becky Breed and Lucy Atkins. I met Becky at a bookstore's author panel discussion. I was more than happy to promote Becky and Lucy's book, and they were kind enough to invite me to be a guest at one of their generative writing group sessions. It was a great experience and this friendship has been beneficial for all of us. I share and comment on their blog, and they on mine. They've guest posted on my blog, and I have done the same on theirs.

The name of the book is, **Writing in Community: Say Goodbye to Writers Block and Transform Your Life**. What they address in their book are ideas I really connected with, such as the following excerpt.

"Something interesting happens when you put voice to your intentions... That which you wish for, somehow comes to pass. Perhaps it is your intentionality in making your dreams come true; perhaps it is the universe shifting its gears on your behalf. Whatever it may be when you are willing to make yourself

vulnerable and speak out loud your deepest longings you draw closer to realizing them."

I believe in this concept of the universe bringing you what you seek. It certainly continues to give me what I seek when I make my desires known. Very much like writing down a goal if you want it to become reality. We put our attention and efforts toward the goal and so do others.

Breed and Adkins say generative writing is, "A Powerful Source of Inspiration." I agree. From one visit to their writing group, I could feel a synergy motivating me to put pen to paper and write something wonderful. Here is an excerpt from a post they wrote for my blog, Moments of Clarity, at gmbarlean.com.

"... we have found what we believe is a powerful way to access inspiration more often. To write more, to write more easily, and to be better pleased with the results. And that is by writing together in what we call a generative writing group, a group that gets together to write. It's not a critique group—there's a lot of value in critique groups, and we belong or have belonged to several, but closest to our hearts is the generative writing group, a group whose primary purpose is to generate writing, so that each person goes home with a new poem or essay, or a paragraph or two for their novel or short story.

"There are what we call the Five Fingers of the Generative Writing Process, five necessary elements to allow the "magic" of inspiration to happen. These are:

"A Writing Group. This can be a group of 3 or more friends who get together to write, or it can be you and one other person meeting at a coffee-shop to write together.

"The Writing Exercise At each writing group meeting, the leader presents the exercise, the subject you will write about. Maybe you are to write about: a time you've been afraid, or one of the "firsts" of a person's life

"The exercise begins with the leader reading aloud a poem or paragraph relating to the subject you are to write about. Next, you might make a list such as "times you've been afraid" or "some 'firsts' in your life." Specific instructions might ask each writer to include a color or an animal in the writing. And the leader could suggest a "starter phrase," such as "I was never so afraid as the time..."

"The Writing After the exercise is presented, you are given 20 minutes or so in which to put your pen to paper and write.

Then Something That Can't be Explained. This is whatever it is that happens when you're writing as if you're trudging through mud; you're slogging along, and then all of a sudden, your writing takes off—and you're writing like mad. This is the "Lightning Bolt" moment that cannot be explained, and which often accounts for our best writing. Maybe it has something to do with:

An intriguing idea in the exercise

The time pressure, which allows you to 'turn off' the editor in your mind

Or perhaps there's something bigger at work, some other force that is with you in the creative process.

"Feedback The fifth finger in the generative writing process is feedback. Each member has the opportunity to read their work and receive feedback—positive only. (After all this was just written a few minutes ago!) Feedback includes what others find in your work that is good and striking and true, what paints pictures in the mind. What made them draw in their breath in excitement and what blew them away."

I recommend Breed and Adkin's book, *Writing in Community*. Its content is something you may find yourself reading more than once. It includes some very good poetry and insights, as well.

Writing Critique Groups

A generative writing group is different from a critique group. Both have value. Both serve a purpose.

A Critique group may be the hardest for a new writer to acclimate to. Accepting critical assessment must be something you're prepared for and understand. I want to begin with explaining the purpose of having your writing critiqued.

Let's say you write your very first book. You think it's wonderful. You have read it and re-read it a dozen or more times and you believe it's finally ready for the world to see. Critiques? "No," you say. "No one is going to tell me how to write my book!" After all, I am an Arteest. This stage of writing is the arrogant/blind phase.

Now, maybe you are an intellectual giant. You have a variety of degrees in literature, writing, English, and psychology. You were so much smarter than the rest of your college class; they actually paid you to attend Harvard. Guess

what? I'll bet you're not reading this book! You already know it all, so I'm not talking to you!

For the rest of us, even the very talented, must realize there may be mistakes or holes in our writing, characters, or plot. We should strive to write the best book we can. Mediocrity is everywhere. Rise above it. Go for being the best at what you do.

No, you pledge! "I am a grammar aficionado. I read the Chicago Manual of Style before bed every night! Really! I'm a genius. It's a curse. My mother says so."

I'll wager even if all that is true, there will still be mistakes in your writing you've missed. We know what we're writing. In our mind, we're thinking of the whole character, plot, setting, and scene. Do we convey it, though, in a way our audience will understand? We really can't know until another person reads it.

And no, the person who analyzes your work shouldn't:

- Be your mother who thinks you're a genius.
- It should not be your best friend who will most likely say it's great no matter what they think.
- Be a neighbor who reads mostly Shakespeare and Ptolemy, so will surely do a great job analyzing your romance genre novel.

1. Thick Skin. If you're really ready to publish a book for the entire world to see, you need to have a thick skin. I promise, not every single person in the entire world will love your book, just like not everyone loves peaches, or chocolate. And, some readers seem to read with the sole purpose of looking for mistakes.

I, for one, love Steinbeck's, *The Pearl*. But, I once sat in a writers group where seven out of the ten people absolutely hated the book and anything and everything Steinbeck wrote. Maybe you feel the same. Maybe you're as baffled as I was.

Go have a look at any famous author's Amazon page and check out their reviews.

A Streetcar Named Desire got three 1 star reviews. Here is one: "The most boring story I ever read, The story of a crazy woman his sex maniac sister and the ape of her husband. All is surrounded by the tipical sexim of William's plays. Don't waste your money." (Sic.) Yes. I kept the typos. This person has an opinion, but may not be whom you want to take writing advice from. Reviewers worth taking seriously aren't just trying to be flippant or mean-spirited. Reviewers you should take seriously are those who put some intelligent thought into their reviews. Criticism has a mean side. Constructive criticism is helpful. Take constructive criticism seriously. Ignore the mean old trolls.

Tolstoy's, Anna Karenina is a book I admire very much, but twenty-nine people didn't. Really didn't. Tolstoy was referred to as disjointed and tedious.

And my poor Mr. Steinbeck's tale of The Pearl. Seventy-seven people were incredibly disappointed. It was called overrated, depressing, really bad, and "simply the most boring book ever written."

Everyone has an opinion. I promise, it's far easier to accept some nasty reviewers flipping you the bird on Amazon if you have a little practice with critique beforehand and have truly done as much as you could to make sure your book was well written.

Constructive criticism, no matter how difficult to swallow, often has truth in it. It may take a while before you are ready to accept it, but if someone, or several people point out a flaw in your story, they may be right. If you catch a problem and fix it before you publish, then you'll be that much further ahead.

All authors believe their work is solid and well written. It's a myth our own minds create. We have to be humble enough to realize we cannot see our work as clearly as others can. Mistakes do not make you a bad writer. They make you human.

2. Catching Problems. No matter how much a writer researches, and even if they lived the story they're writing, someone will find a mistake. When you initially have to endure being critiqued, it can be painful, but that one moment when someone catches a big flaw you hadn't noticed...you become very thankful.

3. Critiquing Others. The odd surprise about the benefits of joining a critique group is, when you analyze other's work, you actually learn to spot issues in your own writing. Seeing overuse of adverbs or on-the-nose dialogue in someone else's writing helps you understand why it can be something you want to avoid.

I won't deny it. Reading your work to others for the sole purpose of having them find flaws can be like running a gauntlet. It can also take some time to come to the point in your career where you're grateful when others catch your mistakes. You need to build confidence in your abilities and it really helps to find a kind writing group! But, once others have picked your work apart, you will be more comfortable publishing your book. You've initiated your work to the public eye. You've also created a support group for those times when someone else might not enjoy your work.

In my group, The Local Muse, we read our completed writing to each other at weekly meetings. We generally bring a chapter we have worked on for several days. The piece has usually been written, rewritten, and edited until we feel it's ready for the group to critique. There are usually seven of us, and we each catch something different. One member of the group might find a plot question, another member will correct a grammar or spelling error, and the next person might suggest a better word to use in a particular sentence.

By the time our books are ready for an editor, as a group, we've gone through them with seven different sets of eyes, all kindly pointing out problems. As a person who has published five books, I know how important it is to have friends and writers I trust tell me what doesn't work in my book. Because if my friends don't do it, the readers will. And that is far more difficult to hear.

Summary:

There are many different types of writing groups. There are generative writing groups—groups with a goal of getting together to write, and critique groups—groups who gather to help each other find problems and make the writing stronger. Both are valuable, but have different purposes.

CHAPTER EIGHT—ACCEPTING CRITIQUE

When you read your work to others, you are probably hoping they'll say, "Wow! You are SUCH a great writer!!!"

Don't deny it. You know it's what you're hoping for. I'm guilty of this, too.

In truth, what will probably happen is they may make some kind comments, ask some questions, offer corrections, and point out places where things weren't completely clear. They might ask questions such as, "How old is your character?" or "Where does this take place?"

By instinct, you will defend your work. "You have to wait for the next chapter! It'll all make sense later in the book," you'll say. I remember doing this. I also remember thinking, Come on people. It's a book. I can't tell you everything in the first chapter!

I know now, my critique partners were only asking questions a reader might ask. A writer cannot leave room for any confusion or the reader might lose interest in the story. The purpose of a critique is to help us see where the holes in our story are.

But, instead of listening with humility and trying to improve my work, when I was first critiqued, I wanted to believe I knew more than they did. I'll tell you without doubt... I did not. They were published authors. I was not. What part of my arrogant human nature made me think my writing was above reproach is a mystery to me! Here is the take away from this story:

You must go into a writing critique group with humility, ready to learn how to make your writing the best it can be. If you don't have that mindset, don't go—you're not ready for critique.

Of course, a comment can hurt if the people in the critique group aren't kind, or don't know the rules of critique. This is why if you create or join a group, it's important for everyone to be on the same page. The next chapter details suggestions about how to give feedback.

I want you to remember one thing that will make you feel much better about receiving a critique. When I read someone's work and it's not ready for

readers, I don't offer analysis as much as advice about reading a book on the craft.

They have too far to go and it will take an educator and classes to teach them the craft of writing before they are ready to be critiqued.

There are many books available about how to write a great book. There are blogs, articles, and classes, too. You really can't read enough about the topic. I've written five books and I still continue to read everything I can about the craft of writing. I'll never be done learning. So understand, if people are willing to offer suggestions or ask questions, they're doing it because your writing is good enough.

Regardless, you may want to prepare yourself for critique. When you begin to read your writing to others, you will probably go through a few stages similar to—

The stages of grief:

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

What are you grieving? You will think it is the death of your self-esteem, confidence, and belief you could ever be a writer! The truth is, what's dying is your arrogance and ignorance. Trust me. You're being reborn, not dying. Embrace humility and find your deep inner-writer's soul. I believe we find our greatest strengths in humility. From this point, we strive to learn and work harder.

The next point I want to stress is you should not ask anyone for a critique if you aren't prepared to accept comments, corrections, and suggestions. If you expect only praise, do not waste another person's time.

Do not ask for analysis of your work if you aren't interested in making your book better. Do not ask for a critique with arrogance. The entire point of

asking for critique is to have your work analyzed. If you only want a compliment, you aren't prepared to write a piece for the public to read.

Make sure you understand what a critique is. It's not about compliments. It's about corrections. Yes, the corrections should be made with kindness, but make sure you realize you are asking someone to do work for you. You don't hire someone to clean your house so they can come in and say, "Oh, it's spotless!" You don't hire a barber to cut your hair so they can say, "No! It's perfect just the way it is!" The job of a critique partner is to offer corrections. Plain and simple. Don't expect anything else.

Summary:

The purpose of critique is to make corrections. Be thankful when someone takes time to do it for you. This is house cleaning for your book. It takes work, so don't ask someone unless you plan to thank them. And, don't ask someone unless your goal is to improve your book.

CHAPTER NINE—HOW TO CRITIQUE

I have attended several different groups and they all agree—when commenting on a writer's work, first say something positive. Second—never, ever be rude. No matter what the writing is like, the author has worked hard and deserves to be treated with respect.

There is an online group called, “Critique Circle.” It is free to be a member. It runs on a system of credits. You review other’s work, and earn the right to have your work critiqued by others.

Here are the behavioral rules listed on the Critique Circle. I’ve left out some that specifically apply just to their website:

Critique Circle Rules

- Please be nice, polite, and considerate!
- Please respect other people's opinions. If you disagree, do so politely.
- Personal attacks and personal comments do not belong.

Here are the things Critique Circle suggests a person look for when they are reviewing. I think these are very good guidelines for anyone to use when reviewing other writer's work.

First say a few words to the author to acknowledge the work they’ve done and the positive things you took from their story.

The first phrase in a story should be like a hook that grabs the reader’s attention and interest. Is this the case? Do you want to read more?

Can you see any conflict in the story? Conflict can be either inner-conflict or outer-conflict.

Is the plot clear and believable? Do you get answers to all the questions that arise in your mind as you read the story?

Can you picture the setting in the story? Are there vivid descriptions? Are all five senses, smell, sight, hearing, and touch used?

Do you sympathize with the main character? Do you care what happens to her? Is she believable and does she seem alive? Does the character change during the course of the story or does she remain the same?

Are the conversations in the story believable? Can you “hear” them?

Is the author consistent in their verb use, or do they roam between present tense and past tense?

Are there too many or too few adjectives?

What is the Point of View of the story? Is the author consistent in its use? Is the POV working? Could another POV be better for the story? Should there be one or more?

Does the author show you what happens instead of telling you?

Is the layout of the text acceptable and easy to read? Does the author use paragraph breaks or is the text just one big lump?

What do you think of the language? Is there slang, or any words you don’t comprehend? Is it too formal, or maybe not formal enough? Do you see any clichés? Are the choices of words good, or are the same terms and words used over and over again?

Is the style “broken” somewhere—Is a part of the story written in a different style than the rest of the text?

What overall impression, if any, did the story have on you?

Were there many spelling problems -- any specific and recurrent? Did the spelling distract you from the story?

Did the story show the protagonist dealing with a significant situation that forces her to make a decision?

Summary. A few words to the author at the end of your critique.

There is a writing group in Omaha, Nebraska called The Night Writers. Dan Reynolds is the man who runs this group. Dan is a successful independently published author and does a fine job of providing leadership for a great group. Below are the guidelines for The Night Writers.

Overall Opinion – Did you enjoy what you read? Was it interesting entertaining well written or make a compelling point? Was it well organized? Did you fully understand what was happening? Did it elicit any emotions from the reader? Was that the intent?

Style – Style can be subjective and often changes based on the intent of the book. How does the writing style compliment or detract from the message the author is trying to convey?

Run On – Does the text ramble or waste valuable white space instead of getting to the point? Can it be “tightened up” or condensed without damaging the story?

Sentence Structure – Are sentences too long? Are they intermingled with shorter sentences? Are there too many big words packed into each sentence? Is the text easily read and understood? What about the use of vocabulary and the proper usage and context of the author’s choice of words?

Narrative – Is the narrative crisp and concise? What about the point of view (POV)? Is it consistent throughout the chapter and with respect to 1st or 2nd person, etc? Is the story told from multiple points of view? Does it work? Would a different style of storytelling improve things? For the most part, fiction should “Show not Tell.” Does the author let the reader see and experience the character’s traits or does he/she tell the reader what to think?

Grammar & Punctuation – Does the chapter require proof reading? While we do not need to point out every error, it would be useful for the author to know if a recurring pattern of mistakes was found.

What suggestions do you have to improve the excerpt you read? Keep in mind that yours is just one opinion one angle of which there are many. We all read and comprehend things differently. The author’s style may satisfy 9 out of 10 readers and you may be the one in the minority. Ask the author questions to clarify your understanding before making suggestions. You may

uncover information that will change the nature of your suggestions completely. For instance, maybe you hate the protagonist. Is this skewing your view of the story? Maybe this was the author's intent.

The following are hard rules of The Omaha Night Writers.
The moderator will interject if these are not followed:

Deliver your critique in a respectful and moderate tone of voice. Concentrate on critiquing the writing; do not attack the writer's premise. The writer developed their premise because he or she has something to say about the topic.

A premise is not for us to critique. Instead we should tell the writer how they might be more effective achieving their goal.

Do not get personal. Sometimes a belief, a political point of view, or a story character that does hideous things will incite feelings of anger to the reader. Most times this is intended by the author and has an important role downstream in the story. Do not let your own opinions get the best of you. Keep neutral and critique the writing only.

Do not attack an author's ability to write. Avoid using words that insinuate that the writer is an amateur or without talent. We are all beginners at some point. Encourage the author to use improved methods to convey their story. We are here to nurture the writer not tear them down.

Most importantly, be honest but encouraging in your critiques. In a few years, the writers you assist now may provide the most useful critiques to you.

My personal observations

Tone is important. Facial expressions are important. I can accept any kindly given critique, but if you sound or look like you're making fun of my writing plot or characters I, and most others, will likely take offense. Again, if the person leads with a kind comment, almost any critique can be swallowed. If all you ever hear from a critique partner is the problems they see in your work, it's hard to not feel offended or lose respect for that person.

Summary:

There are rules to critique and the first rule is to say something nice before pointing out issues that need attention. Be kind. Remember, no one likes a know-it-all. Give advice and opinions carefully and with compassion.

CHAPTER 10—SELF-EDITING

I don't know everything about writing, publishing, networking, editing or marketing—far from it. This book is about sharing what I know and what I believe. I believe we should share what we know and always be ready to learn something new.

I have been blessed to work with several different editors, critique partners, and beta readers. From them, I have learned quite a few tactics I now employ as I "self-edit." I'll share what I know.

Story structure:

Aristotle said there are three parts to a story:

Pity, Fear, and Catharsis.

Aristotle wasn't talking about the writer's view of the story...he was talking about the reader's. Remember, every successful story is written with the reader in constant focus. They must be able to understand the story the author is telling.

Aristotle explains, first the author must make the main character go through something horrible. In this way, the reader will become emotionally connected to the character. They will empathize and develop compassion for the main character. This is what he refers to as "pity."

We interpret the word a bit differently in this era, but essentially, his word choice still applies. "Oh dear, that poor man!" or "I feel that woman's pain!" is what the writer must make the reader feel about the main character. If the reader doesn't connect with the character or pity them in some way, they may not continue to read.

Next, Aristotle says the author must continue to put the character in worse and worse situations so the audience fears for the character. The reader is enthralled—cares and feels connected to him and the conflict he's going through worries the reader. They must keep turning the pages because they hope the character will win out.

Finally, Aristotle says the author must release the character from jeopardy so the reader will have a catharsis. Relief. The end. The character overcomes his obstacles and the reader can close the book knowing all is right again in that characters world.

These three parts of a story might also be called, Suffering, Struggle and Overcoming... or as many of us were taught in school...the beginning, the middle, and the end. Many writers are also familiar with the term, three-act structure. The point is, writers throughout time have studied how to organize a story and what makes a reader want to keep reading.

Words that irritate us.

We all have things we dislike—our own little issues. I have a friend who cannot stand to read the word, felt. I personally bristle when I read the word, got.

I speak fluent Midwestern and that makes my writing style unique, but it can also make some readers unsure what I'm talking about. For instance, I say pop not soda. A southerner would disagree with me on that, as might a northerner. I'm from a family who pulls into a driveway, but one editor I hired was flabbergasted and told me I most certainly do not. I pull ONTO a driveway. My advice is what I've already said so many times. You are writing for the reader. Know who your target market is and the language of the characters you're writing. If you're writing a book for young adults, you'd better get your slang right. If you're writing for a Christian market, filling the manuscript with foul language may deter quite a few readers. Know your reader. This is why it's usually a good idea to write in a genre you like to read. Then you already know what your target audience likes. If you're writing out of the genre you read, do your research and start reading popular authors in that genre.

Keep the reader turning pages.

The moment your reader becomes confused, they stop in their tracks. They re-read the last sentence. Maybe reread the paragraph above. Maybe they have to Google the word or phrase that is confusing them.

It doesn't matter what they have to do... all that matters is, one moment they were blissfully going along reading your story like a person watches a movie. They were involved, riveted, and absorbed. And that's right where you wanted them! But then, because of something you wrote—whether it was poor sentence structure, repetitive wording, or poor word use—you lost them.

Don't let this happen!

You don't want the reader to put the book down, yawn, go get a snack, or even for one minute think they might just stop reading your book. If you confuse the reader, they are pulled out of the story—jerked out of the action, the moment, and the emotion. Torn away from characters and scenes, your reader suddenly remembers they are reading a book—just words on paper written by an author—an author they trusted to hold their attention. You just broke that trust. Now they're thinking, Maybe this is just some lame writer who doesn't know what they're doing after all! Authors can't afford a reader to question our authority or ability.

The goal when writing a book is to make your writing disappear. All the reader should notice is the story. They have to forget there ever was a person who typed and chose the words they're reading. They should be so immersed in the characters and plot they forget about you, the author. One little misunderstanding or error, they will probably overlook, but too many, and you will lose your audience.

So be clear, and write every sentence for the reader, not for yourself, or your mother, or your clever English teacher you're trying to impress. Don't get wordy and use a ton of purple prose unless you're writing flowery poetry. Writing suspense? You don't want John to be crouching behind a dumpster, his heart slamming against his chest as he waits for the man with the gun to come around the corner, to read like this:

John slipped into a crouch like a tiger behind the filthy, reeking dumpster filled with rubbish of varying stench as he paused, terrified at the insistent beating of his heart as it pummeled repeatedly into his chest. He knew the man would come around the corner, but when? Oh, dear God, when?

It takes the urgency right out of it, don't you think? Sounds like royalty is suddenly in a heated manhunt: "By George I do believe there is a man trying to assassinate me!"

You know, if that's the personality of your character, then, by all means, fluff it up. There is a time and place for fluff and a time and place for urgent, get-to-the-point kind of writing. Once again, you must know your audience.

Next, I'm going to tell you my favorite ways to go over my novels before I send them to an editor. I've already talked about the importance of a critique group, but there are things you can do on your own, too.

Read backwards

Seriously. Start at the end of a chapter and read each sentence from the end to the beginning. No, I don't mean to read the actual sentences backward. That would be silly. Just take it sentence by sentence to make sure spelling grammar and structure work as well as they can. Tedious? Yes it is. But, if you're a stickler and really want to make sure every T is crossed and i is dotted, this will help. Why does this work? Because if you read from back to front, you won't get caught up in the story. When I read my manuscript from the beginning, I inevitably become wrapped up in the plot and characters all over again, and I continue to miss the little mistakes.

Use a different font

Between italics, font styles, bolded lettering, or font size, changing these things will make your sentences look different. Your eyes have been looking at these words in whatever original font you typed them. Seeing it differently will trigger your brain to wake up and pay attention.

Print it out

For whatever reason, once we spend the ink to put that chapter on a piece of paper, the mistakes become as obvious as a neon sign. It's the same with a blog post and hitting the "publish" button. Take the help any way you can get it. Print it out and let the mistakes shine through, then you can fix them.

Read it aloud

Nothing works as well to show your mistakes as reading your printed words aloud. Whether you are reading it to yourself or to an audience, even an audience of only one, you will stumble over awkward wording and get hung up at misplaced commas or misspelled words. This is very similar to the cobweb hanging from the dining room chandelier you don't see until everyone is seated at Thanksgiving dinner.

Upload it to your E-reader

One of the best tricks I've come across to date has been uploading my manuscript word document to my Kindle E-Reader. I have uploaded the word document directly, or converted it to a PDF. Either works. Go to this link to download a free app called Send to Kindle. <http://www.amazon.com/gp/sendtokindle>.

Once I'm reading my book like I would read any other, I see every mistake the same way I see mistakes in other people's work. I often read my Kindle with my laptop at the ready so I can make corrections in the original document when I find mistakes. It works pretty slick, and I have found this to be my last step before I send a book to the editor.

Summary:

This chapter reviewed story structure, problem words, and different ways authors can look at their work to find problems. It's very easy to miss our own mistakes because we know what we meant to write. This chapter contains some ideas about how to trick us into seeing our own mistakes.

CHAPTER ELEVEN—MORE TO KNOW

The more you evaluate other's work, have your work critiqued, and hear other's work analyzed, the more you learn about writing. The following are problems I most often deal with and, therefore, are things I've been most highly critiqued for. Because I've been continuously told to correct these problems, it has been beaten in my head to the point I feel I can speak to these issues. Does this mean I no longer need to work on them? Absolutely not. I will always need to pay attention to these details of writing.

Search and Destroy

Something I do when I finish writing a book, or even a chapter, is go on a search and destroy mission.

How to search and destroy:

- In your word document, go to Edit.
- Under Edit is something called Find.
- In that area, you can type the words you want to examine or change in your manuscript.

I use this for many things. In my book, Thorns of Rosewood, I had a character named Mary. I needed to change her name to Betty. I typed Mary in the Find area, and Betty in the replace area. With the click of one button, it changed 2,000 instances where I'd used Mary to now say Betty.

The following words are often things I need to examine to see if I can delete them, or change if I can make the sentence stronger. I put them in my writing, regardless of knowing they are often unneeded because when I am in the creative process, I write fast and don't pay attention to grammar, spelling, and little details. I get the story on the page and edit later. Turning off my brain's editor allows me to be more creative. Left-brain versus right brain.

That

"That" is a word we can often eliminate from our writing, but it's a word we use often when we are talking.

It was easy to see that he didn't like her.
The sentence works without the word, "that."
It was easy to see he didn't like her.

Sometimes, it's okay to use the word, especially in dialogue as we really do talk "that" way! But, in narration omit "that" when you can, or see if you can change the sentence. If you can't take out or change it every time, don't worry. A "that" here and there is not a big problem, but if you litter your manuscript with "that," it gets bulky. The reader may not even know why they feel like they're wading through mud while they're reading, but other authors will notice right away... and so will agents, of course.

Here is a clever little poem by a friend, [Lisa Kovanda](#), a great writer in my critique group, The Local Muse.

*What is it that that that conveys,
That little word that causes editors such dismay,
That that that makes them gnash their teeth,
That that that emphasizes writing that is weak,
That that that needs to go away,
Highlight that that, hit delete and pray,
That that that that disappears,
Will save that editor grief, and that many tears.*

Was

Poor little "was." It is a word, and you can use it. But when you go back over your writing and see that little three lettered bugger, stop and take a look at the sentence to check for a few things. Consider the word "was" to be like the check engine light in your car.

Passive: Ask yourself if the word "was," makes the sentence passive? It isn't always an indicator of a passive sentence, but it can be. If your sentence is, "The ball WAS thrown by Jack." it is a passive sentence. In this specific case, it really isn't the fault of the word, "was." The sentence is passive because the object is having the action (verb) done to it, and that is passive sentence

construction. This is used in some non-fiction text, but rarely does it work well in fiction writing.

In fiction, we like to keep our sentences active because the reader feels more involved. To make that sentence active, you need to put the subject first, and have it do the action (verb) to the object: Jack threw the ball. Keep in mind, if Jack WAS throwing the ball, it's still an active sentence written in past tense.

Past tense and passive voice are two different things. If you need to learn more, this is where I suggest purchasing, *The Chicago Manual of Style*. The main thing to remember is, you want your writing to be active so you can put the reader in the moment and bring them in close. Writers want the reader to be absorbed and involved in the story.

Boring: She WAS standing by the doorway. That sentence isn't passive because she, the subject, is doing the verb, standing. But, it is a boring sentence. Show us HOW she was standing by the doorway. In that sentence, standing describes how she "was." It's very boring and silly if you think about it. But it takes a while for our minds to grasp how to write it in a more pleasing way. Consider writing: She STOOD by the doorway. This is a simple active sentence. That little "was" wasn't necessary! I might also suggest you get more creative. Maybe she wasn't just standing. Maybe she crouched by the doorway, hesitated by the doorway, or lurked by the doorway. Finding that little "was," may have been your opportunity to write more clearly and creatively.

Just

Think about what the word "just" is supposed to do for you. What does it imply? In dialogue, you may decide to leave it as is, because it's "just" the way we talk. But in narrative, is it needed? Here is an example:

I just didn't want to go.

The sentence doesn't need the word.

I didn't want to go.

It says the same thing, either way.

The word, "just," clutters the sentence. Taking it out cleans it up and says the exact same thing. Try to use the word "just" only if you're talking about fairness, or something diminutive. It was just to blame him for the crime. He was just a whisper of a boy.

Feel

I don't have as big a problem with the word "feel" as some do, because when I look it up in the dictionary, one of the word's definitions indicates beliefs, emotions, impressions, and senses. We can feel an emotion and our senses can feel fear or anger.

So, it can be accurate to use the word feel when describing our thoughts about a person or a time in our lives. I believe, according to the dictionary, we are not using the word improperly when we say, "I feel empty."

There are those who have a bone to pick with the word, and have a strong belief it should only be used when describing someone physically using their fingers to touch. You feel with your fingers, is what they will argue. Many take issue with the word, so I have come to put it on my search and destroy list. A little "feel," here and there is one thing, but if I salt and pepper my document with it, I must do some word weeding. Like the words, "just," or "that," "feel," is another word, if you use all the time, you should consider how to increase your vocabulary or at minimum mix up your writing. The reader will eventually begin to notice overused words. Remember, the reader is the most important part of the writing equation.

My author friend, Victorine Lieske, makes this great point about the word, "feel."

"Another reason to avoid using the word "Feel" is in this instance: Sherry could feel his cold fingers grip her arm. – Since we are in Sherry's point of view, there's no need to tell us what she could feel. Just say it. His cold fingers gripped her arm. Another example is "Felt." As in: Sherry felt him press a knife into her neck. You can just say: He pressed a knife into her neck. The reader knows Sherry is feeling it, and that's how she knows about it."

Repeating words

I have no idea why, but when we write we tend to write words many times and write them over and over again.

I think our brains are in overdrive and as we free write we just forget what we've written. I'm guessing there are very careful writers out there who pause and think through every single word before they type it. They call those people editors.

As for me, my creative brain is flying when I'm writing, and often I am writing by what we writers like to call: The Seat of my Pants. Thus, I'm a "Pantser." Some writers are "Plotsers"... they like to plot things out. For some, plotting can mean index cards, for others, an outline. I do a sloppy synopsis of the story before I start writing so I know the general direction, outcome, and the point I'd like to make with the story. But then, I let the story and characters take me wherever they want to go.

It's always good, no matter how you approach writing, to make sure you aren't repeating words. Are you starting every sentence with "the" or "She" or a character's name? Sometimes these overused words will jump out at you, and other times it may take a critique partner to catch them for you.

Cliché

- "In the nick of time."
- "At the speed of light."
- "As old as the hills."
- "Fit as a fiddle."
- "Time heals all wounds."
- "Fall head over heels."

Once upon a time, (cliché) all of the above sayings were fresh and new. Now, not so much. Similarly, using the phrase, "not so much," is quite probably passé by now. I know I'm pretty darn tired of people using the phrase, "just saying." Using current phraseology can make a novel speak to its era, or even be clever and original, but often, using clichés' in our writing shows a lack of creativity or original voice.

I use clichés in dialogue because real people use clichés in their every day conversations. Not every character we create is going to be fresh and edgy. Some characters are old fashioned or habitual. The main thing to remember is, narration is no place for tired clichés. Narration is you writing, so show us what you've got! I fell head over heels in love with him, or, Love hit me like a truck going ninety, leaving me in a pile, all loose and wiggly.

Showing vs. Telling

"Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass."
— Anton Chekhov

Telling: The grass was wet and green.

Showing: My white sneakers squished and stained as I walked across the rain-soaked spring grass.

We never used the words wet, or green, but you knew the grass was wet and green by the words used.

Telling: An old man stood in the doorway.

Maybe we each see, "old," differently. Show us what old, in this situation, looks like without using the word "old."

Showing: The man in the doorway adjusted his baggy trousers with age-spotted hands, not trusting his suspenders to hold up their end of the bargain."

Telling: The happy girl came into the room.

Showing: The girl danced into the room with a smile showing every tooth, and eyes sparkling as she twirled about.

Show vs. tell is difficult to spot in your own writing, which is where we really need to rely on beta readers and critique groups. Sometimes we get in a hurry and say, "Bob was a handsome guy."

Really? How do I know? I can't see Bob. You can't just tell me he's handsome. Show me! Seriously. I'm a fifty-one year old woman. I really want to see how handsome Bob is! How about instead:

"The muscles of Bob's arms flexed beneath his tight black t-shirt. Remnants of stubble on his chin almost hid the dimple nestled there. His aqua blue eyes squinted to the sun and a cowboy hat hung low on his brow, but didn't hide the sparkle in his eyes or the crooked smile on his mouth."

I'll bet you can see Bob now.

Now wait, you say. I'm not a fan of cowboys. Okay.

"Bob leaned one elbow on the counter and rested one foot casually across his other. A light blue tie complimented his eyes—eyes that knew a good business deal when he saw one and grabbed it like a man lining up his destiny. He adjusted his tie, straightened his suit, and offered a smile and nod to the blushing woman who passed in front of him."

Maybe your Bob would be a powerful businessman with an eye for the ladies. Hopefully, that's what you saw when reading the above description of Bob #2.

Sometimes it's hard to realize when you're telling instead of showing, but there is usually no end to other authors willing to point it out for you. Don't take offense. Smile and say thank you, then go write a great scene that shows the heck out of stuff!

Writing Tight

I found a good page from Purdue University:

(<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/572/02/>)

The information on that website describes a myriad of ways to clean up our writing and make it tighter—less wordy. Get rid of the clutter! It's not only the word, "just," or "that," but also many adverbs like, "obviously," "clearly," "actually," "definitely," "generally," "specifically." These words may be over describing things and making your sentences bulky. Here is an example from the link cited:

I received your inquiry that you wrote about tennis rackets yesterday, and read it thoroughly.

Let's dissect the sentence. We don't need the word "that" at all. It's obvious, "you wrote it." We can assume it has been read, and "thoroughly," sounds arrogant. Why does the reader care how thorough you are? Are you bragging?

The following sentence is more concise:

I received your inquiry about tennis rackets yesterday.

Of course, again, if you are writing dialogue, you may be trying to show your character is wordy, arrogant, or overly specific. Then a long wordy sentence would be exactly what you need.

Now, you may argue to be so succinct is boring and leaves out details. Let's look at another example.

After booking a ticket to Dallas from a travel agent I packed my bags and arranged for a taxi to the airport. Once there I checked in went, through security, and was ready to board. But problems beyond my control led to a three-hour delay before takeoff.

I can see reading this in a book. We see these kinds of details in narrative all of the time. But here it is cleaned up.

My flight to Dallas was delayed for three hours.

You're saying, "BORING!"

I'm wondering what was so exciting or important about the details in the longer sentence.

Let's dissect it:

Obviously, you booked a ticket if you're taking a flight. If it's important for us to know you did it with a travel agent then give us a scene.

Yeah. You got to the airport. Is it important for the reader to know you took a taxi? Did something happen in the taxi? Yes? Then show us. No? Then why do we care?

Of course, you checked in went through security and were ready to board. We all do this every time we fly. But, if you had to be strip searched, hey, that would make a great scene. Show us!

If it's not important to the story we don't need to read it. It would be better to eliminate the unnecessary words and instead, write something that moves the story along.

Was the character upset about the delay? Would it throw off his entire plan to overthrow the world? Did he meet someone and fall in love during this three-hour delay? If not, get to the point of the real plot and don't bog the reader down with details.

Make everything you tell the reader something they want and need to know. If a detail in your story is important, then, there is value in describing it because the reader will subconsciously know it's important. If you are mentioning say, a nurse who the reader will only meet once and all you really are trying to achieve is to let the reader see some insight into how the hospital is run, then be brief. Subconsciously, the reader will know they don't need to commit that character to memory.

Summary:

Search and Destroy problem words, don't use clichés in exposition, make sure you're showing, not just telling, and write tight so the story keeps moving. These are some tricks of the trade and why authors use them.

CHAPTER TWELVE—YOUR WRITING TEAM

If your goal is to succeed, build a writing team.

My team is:

1. A support group for networking—The Nebraska Writers Guild
2. A critique group for polishing my work—The Local Muse
3. Beta readers to put it front of brand new eyes to find problems
4. An editor to fix grammar, punctuation, and spelling
5. A cover artist
6. ARC readers to create final reviews and to help promote my book

I'm not a rich woman or a highly paid author. This means I have to work. I have to search and find people willing to help me, and I must be willing to help them in return. So for me, building a writing team isn't about hiring a great staff. It's about making friends and associates who are great at what they do, and about me being a resource for them as well.

Having a solid critique group is darned important in my opinion. Reading your story to others and getting the reaction—good or bad—is tough medicine but it will make you a healthier writer. Editing and analyzing is a left-brain activity and when writing, we're deep in our right-brain. Let your group help you.

Whether you have a real live physical group of people you sit down with once a month or once a week, or if you log on to a free website like Critique Circle, it's advantageous to work out the big kinks in your story during the writing process.

Stephen King's book, *On Writing* says this about critics. “The worst advice? ‘Don’t listen to the critics.’ I think that you really ought to listen to the critics, because sometimes they’re telling you something is broken that you can fix.

Mr. King, regardless if you love or hate his work, is a veteran writer who could basically write words in his sleep and people would buy them. He has critics to be sure, but I'm guessing he laughs all the way to the bank as he thinks about one star reviews on Amazon.com.

Me? Not so much. I'm tiny potatoes. I can't afford to think I'm "the king." And afford should be taken literally. You write bad stuff, you sell no books. Or, you write good stuff, but it isn't following a normal pattern for a book, or meeting the genres expectations, you'll still have trouble selling. It's a jungle out there. Seriously. This business isn't for lazy writers. As Stephen Covey says, we have to continually sharpen our saw.

People ask me, "How did you find a writing group?" or "How did you acquire so many beta readers?"

The answer is, I meet people and start conversations. Conferences, classes, online chats, author fairs, even speaking to a group about my writing... I've found people willing to help me hone my work.

You must have patience. I participated in other writing groups I didn't enjoy as well, but I kept looking until I found a good fit. I now have also found two other writing groups I enjoyed. If I couldn't find a writing group, I would attempt to create my own by having conversations with people who live near me to see if there was any interest.

Beta reading

What in heavens is a beta reader you may be wondering? It's certainly something I didn't know a thing about until I became a writer. I like to think of it in terms of the Greek alphabet. Alpha comes first then beta comes second. So, I write the book and read it first. I as the writer, am the alpha. Then I need a "next" reader. That's my beta—my second reader.

Once I've finished writing a book and before I'm ready to send it to an editor, I send it to as many different beta readers as I can find. I've cultivated my team of readers over the years. It took time.

Over the course of searching for readers, I've found some who think too differently than me, some who make suggestions with too much angst, some who can't really communicate well, and some who just finish the book and say, "It was good!"

Bless their hearts, but that's not what I'm looking for. I kept searching until I found beta readers who really help me make my book the very best it can be.

When an author asks someone to beta read they aren't asking them to edit the book. A beta read is not at all about grammar or punctuation. This isn't really the right stage of the writing process for that type of corrections because many changes in the story can still occur.

A writer is looking for a beta reader who will find:

- Inconsistencies
- Plot holes
- Things that don't make sense
- Character flaws
- Dialogue that doesn't sound real
- Situations they don't like or they don't believe
- Misused words
- Overused words
- Inaccurate data
- Confusion
- Basically, what every average reader is going to call foul on.

For instance, let's say in the first paragraph of a book I write, Bob has brown hair. Five chapters later, I have forgotten what I wrote about Bob's hair and I say he has gray hair. "Wait a minute," the reader says. "Foul!" I'm very glad when this kind of mistake is pointed out to me.

Remember, I'm writing fast, I'm possibly writing chapters out of order, I'm reading dozens of books in between writing and my brain is jumping like Jack Flash. Bob's hair color probably isn't that important and I simply forgot. But I can't do that because I'll lose the readers trust. A beta reader who catches something even this small has done me a huge favor.

Maybe I've written a piece set in a past era. I write about a man driving a Model T, but Model T's weren't invented for five more years. Whew! Glad a Beta caught that one. I can do a lot of research, but that doesn't mean I won't make a mistake here and there.

"This character's sarcasm makes me not like her," a beta might tell me. Now if I don't want you to like that character, then great. But if I do want the reader to like the character, I'd better reexamine her sarcasm. Maybe I can make sure the reader sees the better angels in the character so they can enjoy her biting wit.

Let me tell you about my Beta team. Keeping in mind it may grow or shrink.

Beta reading done well takes time, and if any of these good folks decide they can't take on the project in the time frame I need it done, then I have to respect that.

It's good to have a beta reader who enjoys reading the genre you write. I also look for a beta reader who can speak to an issue I've written about.

In my book, *Thorns of Rosewood*, I have a woman who I would label as a sociopath. So when I met Dr. Joyce Sasse at a writing conference where she spoke about criminal personalities, I walked right up and asked her if she'd beta read for me. The heavens opened and a light shown down when she said, "Sure!" I was thrilled to have her opinion because she is a doctor of nursing psychology. She would be able to tell me if I overplayed the characteristics of the villainess in my story.

In the same token, I have a lawyer, and a retired police officer beta read my books. If there are crime scenes or legal ramifications, these good folks catch it for me. I have to do the research, but they'll tell me if the scene isn't working.

My book, *Thorns of Rosewood*, has a main character who is adopted and searching for her birth mother. I had an adopted woman read it for her point of view. I also had a woman who works with adoptive parents, read the book. Both of these people were able to give me ideas about the way I said things or viewed the topic. For instance, I learned to never call a birth mother the "real mother" as only the parents who raise the child merit that title.

One other person I had read my book, *Thorns of Rosewood*, was a newspaper editor. My main character, Gloria Larson, is the editor of a small town paper. I wanted to make sure I didn't state anything wrong. He did a wonderful job.

I wouldn't send a book to an editor until I had as many beta readers look at the book as possible. From suggestions by beta readers, I have taken out characters, scenes, changed character names, and taken out entire chapters. I have also ignored suggestions. I know what I need to keep in the book, and what can be changed. I especially know I have an issue, which must be dealt with if more than one beta reader mentions it. Regardless, it's my book and I'm the one who decides what will change and what won't, but I have beta readers I trust and respect and so I take their suggestions very seriously.

Editors

Sigh. This part of writing is more difficult and more expensive, too, but let me be perfectly clear. Even if you are an English major and eat, sleep and breathe grammar, you really better have at least one other grammar loving person give your book a read before you publish because it's hard to see your own mistakes. And my suggestion of course is, first run your book through a critique group, then through beta readers, then do your own self-editing, then use a good editor.

I can read a sentence over and again and never see an omitted word or catch the word foul instead of fowl, herd, or heard, because my focus is on the story and I know what I mean. My mind sees it spelled correctly, even though it isn't. Consider the fact I've written 80,000 some words. They're all blurring in my brain.

I'm a good story teller and have a way with words, but I know my limitations. Commas? I love 'em. I want to put them all over the place. I don't have a clue why, I just do. And because I'm more intrigued with reading about the craft of writing and promoting my writing, as opposed to reading The Chicago Manual of Style, I opt to pay someone to edit my work. Not cheap but imperative for someone like me who is more focused on the creative end of writing than the editorial end of it.

When writing genre fiction, your English teacher may not be the best choice to edit your work. Clean English and grammar aren't everything that must be looked for. Your editor needs to also tell you where to tighten up your sentences, and may even need to suggest you move a paragraph to a different place on the page. A genre fiction editor knows what is commonly

done in romance writing as opposed to the style of writing in a hard-boiled mystery.

Book cover designers

I am blessed to have not just one, but two professional cover designers in my writing group. I know. Blessed, I tell you... I'm blessed. Both of these women have designed beautiful covers for my books. Thank you Victorine Lieske and C. K. Volnek.

Every cover artist, and pretty much anyone in the field of promoting books, will say it's the cover that sells the book.

I know, we all know the adage, "Don't judge a book by its cover," but believe me, when it comes to actual book covers, readers most certainly do judge a book by its cover. Want to learn more, read this post:

Judging Books By Their Covers. <http://indiereader.com/2013/05/yes-we-really-do-judge-books-by-their-covers/>

I have learned a few things from rubbing elbows with my artistically cover-gifted friends. The thumbnail size of the cover must grab the reader's attention. That is a very small picture, which means you can't put a bunch of little wording, or pictures, or a scene that doesn't make any sense on your cover. The cover isn't the time to be trying for subtle innuendo. Your cover has to shout out from its tiny picture what your book's genre is, and it must make you want to read it. Also, keep in mind, the reader is probably only going to look at your book cover's picture for a few seconds.

Professional cover designers know the right fonts to use and are up on current trends. Professionals have the best design programs and can do magical things to your cover.

I like to think I'm artistic, but when the chips are down people will always pick a professional cover over something I make. Just show a group of people four or five covers. Have one be professionally done and the other three be your own creations. They won't even hesitate. They'll pick the professional cover.

So, do not slap something together because you really like a particular picture you found. There's a lot more to cover design, and if I knew what, I'd probably be designing covers. But I don't, so here's where I know I have to hire someone. Don't skimp on editors or cover designers. You need those things to make your book as professional as it can be.

ARC readers

The newest part of my writing team is ARC Readers. ARC is an acronym for Advanced Reader Copy. Readers are sent advanced copies before publishing. It is done differently for traditionally published authors than for independently published authors.

I am addressing the independent side of publishing. I noticed authors I follow on Facebook and Twitter talking about their ARC teams. I was fortunate to have one of these authors, **Kay Brattoffer** information about how she arranged for her ARC Readers.

Kay explained how she visited with readers, asking them if they would be willing to read an advanced copy of her book and put up an honest review on Amazon. Her goal was to have books in the hands of readers several weeks ahead of the date she published her book. Then, the day the book came out, the ARC readers would go to Amazon and Goodreads, etc, and put up their assessment. In their review, it is important they mention they were an advanced reader and received a free copy of the book.

My gift to those who read for me was a signed print copy of my book. I specifically asked my ARC readers to give an honest appraisal—I did not ask for five star reviews. I also told them if they read the book and didn't enjoy it, I would appreciate if they did not put up a negative comment, but they would still receive a free signed copy of the book. This worked out very well. On the day I published my book, *Thorns of Rosewood*, I had fourteen five-star reviews.

The purpose of doing this is because a reader is often hesitant to buy a book until there are some reviews. Another reason is, there are places such as **Ereader News Today** or **Addicted to Ebooks**, sites that promote books,

which will not accept a book for promotion until it has at least ten reviews. Until your book has reviews, you have fewer avenues for promotion.

I have always been told it is wrong to pay for a review. For this reason, I initially hesitated to use ARC readers as a promotional tool. I decided to do so because I've been involved with enough professional writers to have learned it is the very big reviewers with huge audience readerships whose assessment will make a big impact on your book sales.

If **Publishers Weekly** assesses your book positively, you will be able to use that review in promotions and it will mean something to other authors, agents, and publishers, as well as most readers.

Publishers Weekly is well respected. If you find a book blogger or best selling writer who reviews your book positively, this will also be of great advantage to you. Believe me—no prominent reviewer will give your book a 5-star appraisal just for a copy of your book.

Even if you must pay dearly for a review, like with **Kirkus Reviews**, they will evaluate your book honestly. You may receive a big thumbs down, so beware. But, if ten acquaintances comment about your book for a free copy, although it will give you the ability to advertise, it won't give you the big push a Publisher's Weekly excellent review would.

Therefore, I do not feel I am breaking rules by giving a book to my readers. It should be noted—Amazon will take down a review if you pay money for it. Here is what they will take down: "Reviews written for any form of compensation other than a free copy of the product. This includes reviews that are a part of a paid publicity package."

But in their review policy they say compensating a reviewer with a free book is not considered paying for a review. "If you received a free product in exchange for your review, please clearly and conspicuously disclose that you received the product free of charge."

You can read Amazon's policy here: <http://www.amazon.com/gp/community-help/customer-reviews-guidelines>

I also believe I've covered my bases because I did not ask for a specific review. I ask for honesty. The truth is, any of my ARC readers could have easily put up a three star review and said it stunk. The first time I saw their reviews was when they went live on Amazon. And once a review is put up on Amazon, I cannot take it down—only the person who wrote the review can do that.

A Review of my steps to build a writing team:

- Join an organization to meet other writers
- Join a critique group to hone your work
- Line up beta readers to clean your book up as much as possible
- Do as much self-editing as you can
- Hire a professional editor to make that baby shine
- Now hire a professional cover designer
- Last, line up your ARC readers for early reviews

Now you will be able to publish your book knowing you have done absolutely as much as you could to make your book as good as it possibly can be. But remember—First and foremost, write a darn good book.

Summary:

Building a writing team includes a group for networking, a critique group for polishing work, beta readers for new eyes to find problems, an editor to fix grammar, punctuation, and spelling, a cover artist, and lining up ARC readers to create final reviews

WHAT OTHER AUTHORS SAY ABOUT WORKING IN GROUPS

I listen to any advice given me by a writer I respect. My friend and NYT bestselling author, Victorine Lieske, suggested I ask the different authors I've referenced in this book to tell me how they network, and about their writing teams. Lucy Adkins and Becky Breed already have specific ideas mentioned about why they have a generative writing group, but here are thoughts from others. I love all of the words of wisdom, and it's great to see how many authors are all on a similar page—page one—"make friends and pay it forward."

What I've Learned

Victorine Lieske,

Author of New York Times Bestseller *Not What She Seems*

Editor of [Addicted to Ebooks.com](http://AddictedtoEbooks.com).

It's funny, I never meant to build a writing team. I wrote, *Not What She Seems*, in one week, while on bed rest from a back injury. I had every intention of taking that first draft, sending it off to a printing press, and ordering up some books to sell. (I knew nothing about the publishing industry at the time. I actually knew nothing about writing fiction as well, so you can imagine how this book read!)

Before I researched printing presses, I decided to send my newly written masterpiece to my brother. I asked him if it gripped him from the beginning, or if it took him a while to get into it. He sent it back to me with tons of comments and suggestions. I remember feeling a bit offended that he'd go through and comment like that on my book. I only wanted to know if it hooked him! But after the initial reaction of "Who do you think you are?" wore off, I realized he had given me something valuable. He'd given very detailed feedback on how I could improve the book.

That is what shoved me in the direction of searching for a critique group, the very first members of my writing team. I live in a small town, so didn't think I'd find any local writing groups. I searched online and found CritiqueCircle.com. I posted my first chapter there, and that set off a beautiful four-year relationship with other writers. I would critique them, and they would critique me. I learned about showing instead of telling, point of view, adding emotion into the story, and so much more. After four years, I finally felt like my book was ready to see the world. But I'd also done some research on how to get published and knew I could not call up a printing press to make my book, and then call bookstores and sell it to them.

Through reading Joe Konrath's blog, I realized I could sell my book as an eBook, through Amazon. Millions of people owned Kindles, and my book could be available for sale right next to all the popular books from the big publishers. What was even better, I could price my book a lot lower than the big named authors, and still make as much, or more, than they were!

Through Joe Konrath's blog, I found Kboards.com, a wonderful forum for indie authors like myself. And through Kboards.com I found an editor, and that added another member to my writing team. Since I'm a graphic designer, I designed my own cover, but I knew nothing about marketing, so Kboards.com helped me tread the dangerous waters of online marketing.

I learned how easily people get offended if you join a group just to talk about your book. The authors on Kboards taught me to chat with people online, make friends, and then the subject of your book would naturally come up in conversation, but not to force it. I made friends with other authors on Kboards. I bought their books, read them, and if I liked a book, I shouted about it online. This naturally led to others picking up my book and posting great things about it. I learned that building a team isn't all about self-service. It's about serving others and letting your friendships cultivate good working relationships.

One of the neat things about creating friendships with other writers is, while we all started out at the same place, I suddenly found myself friends with authors that were making a big name for themselves. People I'd never approach after they found huge success, like Amanda Hocking, I had the pleasure of chatting with and getting to know before they became big names. I count myself very lucky to be able to say I'm friends with quite a few authors who are finding great success.

One of these friends, Vicki Tyley, found huge success with her book by marking it 99 cents when everyone else was raising their prices to get the larger royalty percentage. I took a page from her book and followed her example. This is when my book took off, and after a few months of rising sales, my book hit the New York Times best seller list. Without her example, I don't know if I would have tried that price for a longer time period. I've learned a lot from the wonderful people I've been able to have on my team.

Right as my book found success, I was asked to speak at our local library. There, I met another author from my town, C.K. Volnek. She was finishing up her book and was also finding success, she'd just signed a contract with a publisher. We chatted and became friends, and because of her involvement with the Nebraska Writers Guild, I eventually joined that statewide organization. Through this, I was able to find some wonderful local authors and we formed a writing group.

My local writing group is a huge part of my team. They read everything I write before anyone else. They give me fantastic suggestions. Through their eyes, I see many mistakes and things that can be improved. I owe a lot to my writing group.

As I become involved in writing organizations and extend myself out to others, I have been given such great opportunities.

I owe a lot of what has happened to me to all the many people who have helped me along the way. One of my core beliefs is to give back. I try to help as many people as I can along my way. I did not become a NYT bestselling author on my own, and I try to remember that every day. It truly takes a village.

There is no end to what I could thank Victorine for as she's mentored me and always been more than willing to share her knowledge and ideas. She is a person I can count on. That kind of reliability is rare. I am blessed to be able to call her a good friend.

My Writing Team

By C. Hope Clark

Author of the Caroline Slade mystery series, and the Shy Writer

Editor of FundsforWriters Magazine.

I am very much a loner, preferring to write in seclusion. However, it did not take me long in my fiction effort to learn I needed fresh eyes on my work. Not fond of hiring a stranger to give me his one opinion that might not be in sync with my mission, I searched for a critique team. Today I belong to two critique groups. One in person that meets not far from me in Columbia, SC, and the other online with international flavor. I've belonged to the first one for eight years. The other for ten. And out of those two groups, I've developed a small handful of beta readers I cannot do without. They are my creative tribe.

But I cannot mention my tribe without including my husband. While many authors' spouses don't exactly "get" the complexity of being an author, mine

does. He celebrates every step up the ladder. He listens to my oral edits on the back porch, cigar and bourbon in hand.

He doesn't write prose, but he can tell when it doesn't flow, when a plot point falls short, when the technical aspects of law enforcement are off target. He's a federal agent, which helps when my mysteries reach the parts about weaponry, hand-to-hand, and arrest procedures.

But even without that expertise, he's willing to do what it takes to keep me going. "Are you having fun?" he asks some days. And I usually answer, "Absolutely." He smiles and says, "Then that's what matters." I know so many authors who'd kill for that support, so I work hard not to take him for granted. He's a key part of my team.

In terms of marketing, however, my team consists of my social media following and the members of FundsforWriters, a newsletter for writers I created 15 years ago. They are my cheerleaders. Their word-of-mouth is invaluable to me. But in the last two years, I've become aware of and nurtured a different group . . . my peers.

These are other authors, editors and professionals I've met as I traveled the country speaking at conferences. What began as simple tours to promote my work and gain new readers, quickly turned into a remarkable networking magnet.

I've gathered a lot of connections amongst agents, writers, editors and marketing experts who come to me and I to them, exchanging and seeking advice. When I'm stymied with a problem, with a quick moment of thought and a few keystrokes, I can find a party I've met and conversed at some past event, and obtain direction.

In this business, a ripple in the pond may travel a long way. All relationships are worth tending.

A fan reviewing your work can touch an agent who reads the review. A person you befriended at a conference may introduce you to an editor. A panelist at a conference can remember your kind word and ask for your manuscript, or offer a word of recommendation to someone else. Another author at the booth next to you just might offer you a speaking opportunity at another event she

volunteers for. Some of the entities who've advertised in FundsforWriters have become friends and close business acquaintances, and keen sources of expertise. No one is too small or too famous. All people we meet in this business are opportunity.

For that reason, I do my damndest to treat any email, call, or eye-to-eye introduction with the highest of respect. One day our roles could be reversed. One day that new author might be the one who breaks the NY Times Bestseller list and reach back to me. Or he could never publish yet become one of my strongest fans. The stranger I helped could open a door to a library presentation, get my book in a bookstore, or introduce me to a writers' group that wants me to speak (and sell books).

At a recent critique group, as I sat around the table at a restaurant where we tend to gather after our meeting, I answered questions about self-publishing, how to break into speaking engagements, and more. I surprised myself by saying, "It's all about being nice to someone you meet, and them then being willing to open a door for you in return." It's who you know, in a wide, respectable, open-arm sort of way. Anyone who writes or reads and connects with me is worth gold.

One gentleman in the group responded to me by saying, "The fact is, you hustle, Hope. You work hard and hustle." Yes, I do. But I don't blindly pass by people, and I definitely don't step on or over them. Everyone crosses your path for a reason, and who am I to ignore potential opportunity?

Thank you, Hope, for the great insight and truths. You are right, it absolutely takes hustle and work, but forgetting the hands that help us up really would be ignoring people who crossed our paths for a reason. Hope is an extremely astute businessperson as well as an excellent writer. It's a joy to know her.

GO, TEAM, GO!

by Kay Bratt

Child Advocate and Author of The Scavenger's Daughters Series.

Many writers have a natural inclination to crave solitude, but managing a career in writing can be a lonely and arduous journey when embarked alone.

It took a few years for me to realize it, but now I've found building relationships within the writing community is a vital ingredient to a successful publishing career.

After my first self-published book was discovered and re-launched by a publisher, getting that book to market was an eye-opening process. With it, I saw how much being a part of a team can invigorate productivity and improve the overall experience of publishing a book. As a hybrid author, I decided I wanted the same sort of experience with my indie titles as I was getting for my traditionally published titles. I already had a team of beta readers—they are vital in finalizing the last drafts of any story. I also found input from other authors to be priceless. They truly understand the process of creating a story that resonates with readers, as well as every other step in the publishing process. So I began a search for other authors who I could approach to ask to be a part of a small author group.

In time, I found hybrid authors like me, who publish both traditional and indie titles. Most importantly, they are proven professionals I can trust with my manuscripts, marketing ideas, and even share the occasional frustrations that we writers go through. Yet more than the business aspect, it's about supporting each other and the relationships of trust we've built.

A huge perk of the team we've built is the accountability aspect. My team connects each Monday morning via email to update each other on what we've accomplished in the last week, as well as state what we plan to tackle in the upcoming days. In addition to goals, we trade marketing plans and ideas, bouncing success stories or failures off each other as we brainstorm new ways to build our readerships. Then lastly, when it comes to the writing, my author team trades drafts back and forth for in-depth critiques on plot, characterization, and even proofreading when needed. Later, after the book is launched, we discuss strategy and ways to get it in front of the readers.

If you are very selective, you will find authors who each bring something different to the table. In my team, we have one member who is a genius at character-driven works, while another has a background in theatre and can point out when the pacing needs work and where more drama is needed. Another one rocks the emotional aspect of a story, and all of us have an eye for choosing impactful covers and can give honest feedback, even when difficult to do.

With the right team in place, the relationships you nurture will be a constant source of motivation, and will steadily refuel your creativity as you continue to take on the world of publishing. And if you are very lucky and put in the time, these author contacts will become lifelong friends.

As an extension of my author group, when it comes to my indie titles, I also have a team of professionals who are in place when each book is ready to move on in the production stage. Every indie book I publish goes through a copyeditor as well as several proofreaders to give it that final polish. In addition, I commission talented artists to create my covers, and also hire out the formatting of both print and eBook versions to ensure my indie title is presented to my readers just as professionally as my trade-published works. In other words, I invest in the future of each book to give it the best chance at success.

The final step in the process is for advanced reader copies to go out to my street team, which in my case, is called Kay's Review Krew. Over the years, I've built up a team of dedicated fans who are eager to get their hands on my books before they are available to the public. In return for that favor, they agree to post honest reviews the day or same week the book is launched, and many of them even use their social networking platforms to announce the new release and spread the buzz. As my Review Krew has gained traction, I've found that those readers have been invested in helping to build my career. In addition to the marketing I do, anything that my Review Krew does on launch day helps build momentum.

In addition to building an author team and a street team, I also strongly believe in paying it forward and sharing what I've learned. Over the years I've helped a handful of authors traverse the winding roads I've already conquered, holding their hands as they maneuver around the many potholes of publishing for the first—or even third—time. I've critiqued manuscripts, written blurbs, encouraged building social marketing platforms, and even helped promote authors who are struggling to build their first solid thousand readers. The reason I do this is that I can still remember how hard it was for me starting out, and my goal is to soften that experience for others in any way that I can with as much time as I can possibly spare to give. Several of the authors I've helped get a foot up have gone on to be very successful in their publishing endeavors, giving me a sense of satisfaction that I was possibly one small part of their achievements.

So, in the words of E.B. White, it is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. So go out and find your author team, your street team, and a few newbies to take under your wing. And make sure to cultivate those relationships!

I have been blessed to be one of Kay's newbies she took under her wing. I cannot even explain the joy it gives me to have such an amazing author support my work and give me ideas and advice when I need it.

Why on Earth would I want to do that??

by Lisa Kovanda

Author of *Modified Flight Plan*

Screenwriter, President of The Nebraska Writers Guild

I had two completed novel manuscripts when I decided it might be a good idea to learn what the heck to do with them. To say I was clueless was an understatement. I knew they needed revision, (and neither is published at this point, because they need so much work), but I had no idea where to begin. So, I started doing some research online.

The first thing I wanted was a critique group. You know, to see if I had any idea how to actually, oh, say write. I found a now-defunct group, and began the arduous process of learning about things like point of view, show, don't tell, story structure, and character development. I read my work, listened to feedback, researched more stuff online, and fumbled my way through the first bits of the revision process. Even though I wasn't sure of myself, I gave others my thoughts on their work, and grew as a result of stepping out of my comfort zone. I'm with a phenomenal writing group right now, and since you're reading this book, you've either heard from, or will hear from several of my writing sisters. Keep hunting until you find the perfect fit—even when you're playing the field, you'll gain valuable knowledge.

The second thing I researched was professional organizations, because it seemed like networking with writers who were successful might be helpful. I learned about agents, queries, and the ins and outs of being an indie publisher. (There is so much more to this writing thing than actually...writing)

I discovered there was an organization named the Nebraska Writers Guild. It was founded by some of my favorite Nebraska authors, including Willa Cather, Mari Sandoz, Bess Streeter Aldrich, and John G. Neihardt. My goal was to someday be a good enough writer to belong. A few months later, another writer friend suggested we attend a conference sponsored by the Guild. I was pretty nervous, these were real writers. With actual books. No, I wasn't nervous, I was terrified.

I went to the conference anyway. The people were nice. They didn't care that I hadn't published anything. Not only that, but they wanted to hear about what I was working on. Before I left, the Guild secretary handed me a membership packet and card with my name on it. "It will save me the postage when I get your dues check."

(Best recruiting technique ever!)

Well, the membership card was already made out, so I figured I'd better pay up. I went home with a lot of writing information, a boost of confidence, and some great new friends who understood my writing affliction.

Since I'd paid good money to part of the Guild, I jumped in with both feet. I asked questions. Talked to people with expertise in the areas I wanted to learn about. And, I volunteered, because the more I hung out with other writers, the more I learned about the craft and business of being a writer.

As a direct result of joining the Guild, I summoned the courage to enter my first writing contest—one sponsored by the Bess Streeter Aldrich Foundation—a Guild founding member. And I won. That's how my real journey as a writer began. Two years later, I was nominated for President of the organization founded by my literary idols. (Looking back, I am convinced I just didn't say no quickly enough) Now the real adventure was about to begin.

If I didn't know anything about writing when I joined the Guild, I knew less about leading it. Oh. My. God...what did I just get myself into? It's been hard work leading a premiere organization of over two hundred members. The Guild is an IRS 501 (c) 3 designated non-profit organization; so throw in a bunch of regulatory details, in addition to running conferences, booking national-level speakers and agents, ensuring Guild publications are produced,

and a thousand other things that end up in my planner pages. Did I mention that I write books and scripts, and work a full time job?

So, now that I've convinced you why this is the worst possible thing you can do for your career, let me tell you what I've gained from being the President. First is credibility. People might not know who Lisa Kovanda is, but they will respond to, "President of the Nebraska Writers Guild." I've had to learn to be at ease around those agents and industry insiders. Time balancing? I've become a master-juggler. I have a Franklin planner, and I'm not afraid to use it. I've met some awesome amazing people, including some of my closest friends. Love them so much! And, most importantly, I write. How the heck can I run a writing organization and not write myself? It's given me the accountability to glue my butt to the chair and make it happen.

The result has been that in the past three years, I have published three novellas, a co-written memoir, and have a new full-length true story release coming in two months. I've also received some national recognition for my screenwriting, and had two scripts make their way to the screen—and acted in a music video, which is a whole different story.

At the end of the day, I can tell you that being the Nebraska Writers Guild President has forced me to make the jump from wannabe to professional writer. So, if you're looking to jump-start your career, my suggestion is simple. Jump into the deep side of the pool. Swing from the trapeze without a net. Take the controls, and make it happen. By stepping out of your comfort zone and volunteering, you'll gain much more than you give.

Lisa and I share a writing group, a feeling of responsibility to the Guild, and a penchant for dark fiction. She's a force of nature and I'm always impressed as she piles her plate full of project, then manages to eat them all. I love associating with intelligent people, and Lisa is certainly one. She also brings a very keen eye to critique and I take her suggestions seriously.

Critique Groups Have Changed My Life

by Dan Reynolds,

Indie Author and Leader of The Omaha Night Writers Critique group

My participation in a critique group has forever changed the way I write. The advantages of membership are countless—the negatives few, if any. As a

member, I am committed to critiquing two excerpts from fellow writers each month. This is not so much a chore as it is an exercise to sharpen my own skills. I get to experience how other authors write, savor their techniques, and borrow those that will make my own writing stronger. Their experience becomes my experience, and their tips and shortcuts become mine as well. After eight years of membership, I have grown to be a competent writer. I will devote the rest of my career striving to achieve something more than competence.

Nine years ago I wrote my first book. I chose to self-publish so I could have complete control over the creative aspects of my writing. But self-published authors are on their own. They don't have publishers at the ready to edit and market their books.

So there I was manuscript in hand. I asked myself, who will edit my books? Fix my commas? My friends and family loved my manuscript, but even if they had hated it, do you think they would tell me?

I needed outside opinions from people I didn't know. How else could I truly learn if others would accept my books? I needed a writing group. When I asked Omaha's Concierge Marketing for their advice, they told me that there were several writers looking for a critique group. They asked me if I would chair a critique group under the name "Omaha Night Writers." I agreed, and within a few months, we had several members.

I needed a charter statement, and rules by which we could govern the group. I was emphatic that we would critique honestly, but respectfully. The guidelines I assembled are still in use today. I will tell you that I have critiqued writers who didn't seem to have much talent when they first joined us. But to my surprise, with a little nurturing, they blossomed into good writers. I suspect that I too, was in this category. You see, having a good imagination or a natural talent for story telling isn't enough. Getting a story down on paper takes a completely different skill set. And writing fiction is not the same as writing non-fiction. The rules are quite different.

I was a little embarrassed to learn that I had been writing from instinct—a sense of what I had picked up from reading other authors. I had been mimicking them. To be more precise, I couldn't tell you why I did the things I received praise for, or why I made the mistakes I made.

For one thing, I didn't speak the lingo. For me, this began a lifelong endeavor to ask questions about the craft of writing, no matter how simplistic they were. I was sometimes embarrassed to ask questions for which I was certain everyone else knew the answers. That old saying that there is no such thing as a stupid question—well; I was the one asking them.

Fortunately, I was wrong. Not everyone knew the answers. Our discussions led me to purchasing a few reference books, like the CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE, and GREGG REFERENCE MANUAL. I still use them to settle differences of opinion.

To say that one needs a thick skin to join a writing group is an understatement. I often find myself telling new recruits that their first few critiques will be painful, and that afterward they will doubt their ability to become a good writer. I also tell them that a bruised ego is normal, and it simply means they are learning the rules of writing. A critique group is no place for someone who is averse to accepting constructive criticism. In my own case, I submitted my first excerpts before checking my ego at the door. Painful? Yes. Humbling? You bet. But I swallowed my pride and listened to the more experienced members of the group. Even the less experienced writers were able to leave me with valuable nuggets of wisdom. I remember when one of my members told me that my dialog was stilted. Ouch. But today character dialog is one of my strengths. See how it works?

Here's the thing: authors are also readers, and it's the opinion of readers that counts. If something I wrote is vague to even one reader in a group of ten, I'll still go back and examine the passage to see if there is something I can do to clarify it. Some writers will only examine a passage if it is confusing to several readers. Using the statistics above, I wouldn't want ten thousand readers in every hundred thousand to have to stop and try to figure out what I was trying to say.

There are about ten basic rules that will improve your writing a thousand fold. There are another thousand rules that will improve your writing about ten fold. Learn the big rules first, and be patient as you spend the rest of your life learning the rest. After attending several meetings, you will find that you are discovering the same mistakes in your peer's submissions that they once found in yours.

If you join a critique group your growth as a writer is virtually guaranteed. A good student of a critique group will steal (yes steal) the ideas, techniques, and methodologies they need to become the writer they want to be. I have nothing but gratitude for every member of my group. My current writing style has been heavily influenced by all of them. I have never submitted a completely clean excerpt to the group, but they no longer need to look for the simple mistakes I once made. I write with more confidence than ever before and with each meeting I learn something new—something I am eager to apply to my own work.

I've only recently met Dan and become a part of the Omaha Night Writers. So far, I'm impressed. It's become evident to me, Dan is a networker, a person who pays it forward and passes it on. He sets a good example. I'm looking forward to meeting more people like him and all of the other authors who have weighed in about why networking and working in groups can make a huge difference in an author's life.

Community

by C. K. Volnek

Traditionally and independently published author

As a parent I am familiar with the saying 'it takes a village to raise a child.' Very true, but as a writer, a new phrase needs to be added... 'it takes a community to create an author.'

A community? You may wonder why. Writing is a trade where even the shy and introverted individual can flourish, right? They can hide away and compose, live as a hermit and be happy in the loneliness of the occupation. Sorry, that's not how it works. Few authors are blessed with the genius to be able to sit down, create a masterpiece, and market it to the throngs without assistance.

I can attest to the joy of creating in front of my computer, alone with my muse. It has its freedoms. See, I am one of the introverted ones, scared of what others might think or say, afraid I will fall flat on my face if I try to impress. I

have learned that writing is not a passion for the weak or easily offended. I cannot do it on my own. If I want to reach my writing goals, it will take a community. A network of peers to offer their support and honest critiques, line and content editors, beta readers, bloggers, marketers and of course, my intended audience, my reader. I admit at first soliciting the help I needed put me way outside my comfort zone, but it has gotten easier the more I practice and interact and I have been rewarded by many new friends and colleagues in the process. They have been with me through the frustration of fine-tuning my stories as well as the joy of a finished manuscript. I am thankful for their encouragement and service.

So, my word of the day for writers is community. Reach out to all the people you can and network yourself to success.

C. K., or as we in The Local Muse call her, Charlie, is the lovely woman who introduced me to all of my Muse sisters. Everyone we meet has the potential of playing a positive role in our lives and Charlie has been that for me.

CLOSING

Any team effort requires a leader. In the field of writing, that leader is you, the author. Just like in a business, the owner of the business is who starts things out. They have the dream—"I want to sell a whizbang! I will make and sell the greatest whizbang in the area! I will be known as, Mr. whizbang!"

You start your business and think, hmmm, "I really don't know any of the other business owners in the community. I notice the gal selling doohickies across the street has an empty lot near her store. I'd sure like to set up pop-up sales in her spare lot since it's right on the highway. And boy, that couple doing the hepphump cleaning down the block, they have a good amount of parking spaces they don't use because they have a drop-off window. It would be great if my customers could park in those spaces. How can I best work with these other business?"

You join the Chamber of Commerce. It's very much like a writer joining their state or city's writers Guild. This over-arching organization provides an

opportunity for all the business people to network with each other. It will also give them service opportunities to put their smiling face in front of community members. Let's face it. Joe from the north side of town might buy his whizbang from you instead of the big box store if you have a nice visit with him as you serve him a flapjack at the community pancake breakfast!

You still have a lot to learn about making whizbangs. So you join the local whizbanger club. Everyone there has been making whizbangs for years and years. They're a helpful bunch and they'll give you good advice and keep you on the right path.

Now you need some workers because your business is really growing. You need to get everything done just right so the customers are happy. You hire all the right folks and you know all of the right ways to make your whizbangs perfect.

As an author, first, you are a creative soul who writes a book, but then, you must be an entrepreneur and sell it. Think like a business owner. You have to think like Mr. Whizbang did.

The ideas I presented in this book pointed out why I believe it is important to get out and meet others in your writing community, so you can network and get your face out in front of the writing and reading world. I would suggest joining a larger organization such as a statewide or even nationwide writing organization. Attend their workshops and conferences. Meet others and make friends.

From those new friends, see if you can find or create a smaller writing group—perhaps a critique group to hone your work. Learn the rules for evaluation and editing and be professional in how you give and accept critique. Write a darn good book!

Everything I've ever succeeded in has happened because of the support of many people. Not just financial and physical help, but also emotional support. My mother-in-law babysat our children while I went on photo shoots. My husband and son helped me load batteries on pallets for a community battery recycling drive for the Chamber, among many other projects. My sister helped organize food sales for musical events in the opera house. I have always been able to find good souls to help me with worthy efforts.

This has also been the case since I've embraced the craft of writing. Everything I have learned, every success I've had, can be attributed to tenacity, curiosity, hard work, and the kindness and support of other writers, writing groups, friends, and family. I simply could not be a published author without help from the people I've met along the way.

I want to challenge you to create your own team for success. Do it in a way that works for you. Learn everything you can about self-editing, then find a reputable editor to make your book the very best it can be. Look at your book from every angle, and make sure it's ready for the all-important reader. Then let your friends help you find mistakes, and don't forget to thank them. Finally, publish your book or send it to an agent or press knowing you've done the very best work you can do.

Be hungry, be humble, be helpful. Get out there, take life by the horns, and make it happen. If I can do it, you can do it. And I hope, eventually, you will pass on what you know to others.

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