

Going for the Gold!

By Ann Charles and Wendy Delaney

It's that time of year again—goal time. Time to take out the old goal chart, dust it off, and pick up your pen. And if one of those new goals has anything to do with a contest (maybe even the Golden Heart), we have some tips and techniques to help make that contest entry shine.

The Basics—Top 10 List

You've heard them before, but a recap never hurts.

1. Beware of bad grammar, typos, poor punctuation, etc.
2. Use standard formatting.
3. Check each page to make sure your printer did not delete any lines or run out of ink.
4. Do not use an excessive amount of exclamation marks.
5. Avoid clichés.
6. Learn to accept critiques and feedback on your work.
7. Avoid back story and start your book in the right place.
8. Make sure your conflict is strong enough to carry the reader through to *The End*.
9. Avoid the overuse of introspection.
10. Do not over-describe your setting in your story.

Beyond the Basics—Top 10 List

Things you can do to enhance your submission's shine factor.

1. Make your opening stronger.

Story Openers

Dialogue, narrative, or action—which is the best way to start a story? There is no *best* way. You have to grab the reader's attention on the first page and make them want to read more. Connecting your opening hook to your main plot or story question (*will the protagonist achieve his/her goal?*) can help to capture the reader's interest.

What Is Going On?

Remember, the reader needs to know in the first couple of pages the five W's:

- "WHO are these people?"
- "WHERE are we?"
- "What time of the day is it?" (aka WHEN)
- "WHAT are we doing here and WHY do we care?"

2. Don't fall in love with a word or phrase.

Unique Words

Unusual, unique, and funny words or phrases are memorable for entirely wrong reasons when overused.

Repetition & Redundancy

- You do not need a recap of what happened in the prior chapter.
- Eliminate exposition that repeats the same information your characters provided via dialogue.

- Avoid unnecessary repetition of the same name or bit of description.

3. Use enough details to paint the reader a picture.

Infuse your writing with vivid, meaningful details. Be specific, but don't bog down your story with pointless details. Remember, if your writing is stale, then your book will likely end up being a wall-banger rather than a best-seller.

4. Edit your story to make it shine.

Word choice

- Kill most of your adverbs—look for the 'ly' words.
- Choose the correct word. Spell Check does not always catch incorrect word usage such as there/their/they're.
- Pack meaning into your words. Whether your heroine walks, bursts, saunters, or glides into a room, word choice helps reflect character and mood.

Similes and Metaphors

A simile is a comparison of two things using *like* or *as*. A metaphor is an implicit comparison without the use of *like*. Used well, similes and metaphors help convey images and ideas to your reader.

- Simile example: Superman has strength like steel.
- Metaphor example: Superman is the man of steel.

Smooth Transitions/Sequel

Setting or time changes can jar your reader out of the story. Bridge two scenes with a sequel, where you can summarize and skip time, giving your focal character an opportunity to react to what just happened as well as pave the way to the next scene. Or, link two scenes with a transition line like, *By the time she pulled into her driveway that night...*, indicating a passage of time.

Read Your Work Out Loud

Pay attention to the rhythm of your words. Do your ears hear a clunker of a line that your eyes did not see? Is the same pattern or rhythm repeated over and over? If so, fix it.

5. Make your book a page turner.

Pacing is a key element to learn and use correctly in a story. Have you ever read a book that seemed to make time slow down? That is an example of slow pacing.

End Scenes and Chapters with a Hook

Just as you started your story with a hook that makes the reader want to read more, you need to end each scene and chapter with a hook that makes the reader want to keep turning pages.

Use Scene and Sequel to Keep Your Story Focused and Compelling

Scene and Sequel is the concept of using stimulus and response (action and reaction) to build a story with compelling forward movement. Scenes consist of a goal, conflict, and disaster; sequels contain the character's reaction to the scene's disaster, his/her dilemma regarding it, and his/her subsequent decision, propelling the reader into the goal of the next (or a subsequent) scene.

Cut, Cut, Cut!

Cut everything that does not move the story forward. Read your story and ask yourself the following questions for each sentence. If your answer is “no” to either question, cut it.

- “Is this sentence necessary?”
- “Does it move the story forward?”

6. Avoid playing the role of the *author* instead of the storyteller.

Learn to avoid filling pages with too many fabulous *authorly* phrases that might distance the reader. Allow the characters to breathe and the story to unfold. Drop in some subtle hints, add one or two brush strokes of specific detail, and let the readers draw their own conclusions and fill in the big picture. If your readers are allowed to help tell a story, they’ll enjoy it more.

7. Think GMC (Goal, Motivation, Conflict) as you write and/or edit.

Are your characters properly motivated? Are the scene goals important enough to keep the reader turning the page? Make sure your scenes work for you and your story. If you have a scene that is not pulling its weight, it’s probably weighing down your pacing. Again—cut, cut, cut!

8. Avoid instant lust (unless it is erotica).

Your reader is willing to suspend her disbelief to a point, but do not ask her to buy into a relationship (or any action in your story) that has not been properly motivated or you risk irritating your reader.

9. What is the story question?

Will the protagonist defeat the antagonist and achieve her goal? This is the question that the reader should formulate after she reads your story opener. You want your reader to latch on and journey with your characters to *The End* to find the answer.

Also, each of your characters should have their own story questions that may or may not be related to the book or protagonist’s story question, giving your readers a reason to care what happens to every character. That is your job as author—**Make the reader care.**

Finally, make sure you have enough at stake with each story question to make the story compelling. Characters’ goals shouldn’t come easily. Compelling fiction is filled with strife. Get your characters up a tree and throw rocks at them.

10. Trust yourself. Trust your voice.

Do not let other people (including well-intentioned critique partners) dilute your voice. Think of your favorite author and the way his/her writing sings to you as you turn each page. Your writing should also sing—but in *your* voice.

So, trust yourself, write your story, and make it shine.

Co-written by Ann Charles this essay was originally published in Heartbeat, January 2008.

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