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Getting Golden

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Contents

Getting Golden—Make Your Writing Shine!	1
The Basics—Top 10 List	1
Beyond the Basics—Top 10 List	2
Contact Information	6
Appendix A—Tips from Mystery Author J.A. Konrath	7
Appendix B—More Tips	7
Bibliography	8

Getting Golden—Make Your Writing Shine!

Two Golden Heart finalists share tips and techniques to strengthen your writing

The Basics—Top 10 List

The top ten basic tips you need to know when it comes to writing genre fiction

Beyond the Basics—Top 10 List

Ten beyond-the-basics tips you need to reach the next level of your writing

Appendix A—Tips from Mystery Author J.A. Konrath

“Tips for the First Chapter” provided with permission by J.A. Konrath

Appendix B—More Tips

Websites where you can find great writing tips from some published authors



Getting Golden—Make Your Writing Shine!

So you are no longer a *newbie*, and you want to take your writing to the next level. Maybe you have been thinking about entering some writing contests—maybe even the Golden Heart. Well, you have come to the right place. As Golden Heart finalists we have judged a lot of contests, including the Golden Heart. Today, we will share tips and techniques to strengthen your writing and help you avoid the common newbie mistakes we see when judging contests.

The Basics—Top 10 List

The following list covers what we feel are the top ten basic tips you need to know when it comes to writing genre fiction. We will not go into depth on any of these tips because we assume everyone here is already familiar with the fundamentals.

1. Beware of bad grammar, typos, poor punctuation, etc.
2. Avoid formatting problems. Use standard formatting, even if you think it is boring (even if you have a favorite font).
3. Make sure your printer does not delete any lines or run out of ink when you submit to a contest, agent, or editor. Proof those pages! You have one chance to make a good first impression.
4. Do not use an excessive amount of exclamation marks in your manuscript, synopsis, or query letter.
5. Avoid clichés. If you have heard it a million times, so has your reader.
6. Learn to accept critiques and feedback on your work without opening a vein or rewriting your story until it becomes a generic, lifeless pile of words.
7. Avoid back story (and this includes most prologues—many readers skip them). Start your book in the right place. Try to start with action.
8. Make sure your conflict is strong enough to carry the reader through to the end of the book. If the conflict is contrived, you will have a hard time making your reader care enough to finish your book; and as the author, you will struggle to reach "The End."
9. Avoid the overuse of introspection. It can bog down your story's pacing.
10. Do not over-describe your setting in the beginning (or anywhere in the story) to the point of having your reader become bored and confused. Unless you are a police detective investigating a murder scene, too much information is not a good thing.

If you have any questions about any of these ten basic tips, contact either of us after the workshop.



Beyond the Basics—Top 10 List

The following list goes beyond the basics to reach the next level of your writing.

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. Some will tell you to use dialogue, others will say that action really starts the story with a bang; and yet many times, a best-seller will begin with narrative. The key is not what tool you use to start the story, but whether you can make the reader want to buy your book and continue reading.

Note: Be careful when starting with dialogue. If you do not clearly show who is saying the dialogue, the story can get off to a confusing start.

Confusing Beginning

“It’s a curse.”

Angélica García frowned at her father over her flashlight beam, wondering if the heat had fried his brain. “It’s not a curse, Dad.”

“Go over it again, gatita. And this time, use plain, old English.” Juan García reached out and gently tweaked the tip of her nose. “Not all of us speak Mayan in our sleep.”

Clear Beginning

“It’s not a curse, Dad.” Dr. Angélica García stared at her father over her flashlight. The sweltering heat inside the dark Maya temple must have over-cooked his brain.

“I know a curse when I hear one.” Juan García’s silver-haired sideburns glistened with perspiration as he examined the temple wall.

Angélica grinned. “You can’t be serious.”

Her father’s eyes lacked their usual sparkle when he turned to her. “Read the glyphs again.”

Dear Lord, he was serious. Her grin slipped.

“And this time, use plain, old English. Not all of us speak Mayan in our sleep.”

The Old “Hook” and Grab

You have to grab the reader’s attention on the first page and make them want to read more. Connecting the 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? (Context)

Remember, the reader needs to know in the first couple of pages the five W’s: who, what, when, where and why.

- “Who are these people?”
- “Where are we?”
- “What time of the day is it?”
- “What are we doing here and why do we care?”

Do not make your reader guess the answers to these questions.



2. Do not fall in love with a word or phrase and use it over and over again.

Unique Words

If you use an unusual, unique or funny word or phrase, your reader will remember it. Feel free to use a unique word to your heart's content on the first draft. But when you sit down to revise, scan for its use in your manuscript and determine what you can do to make this snippet of dialogue or description better. Unique words or phrases are memorable for entirely wrong reasons when overused.

Repetition & Redundancy

- You are not writing for a soap opera. You do not need a recap of what happened in the prior chapter.
- Eliminate exposition that repeats the same basic information your characters provided via dialogue.
- Avoid using the same name or bit of description over and over again.

Here's an example of a passage that illustrates some of these problems:

After staring at her for several seconds he said, "Think about it, Ms. Munroe. I'm offering you the opportunity of a lifetime. Something you'd never get working here or at any other big firm."

She didn't want to think about any opportunity he had to offer, even if it was true that he could offer her opportunities that she couldn't get working at Meyer, Stanton, and Russo, one of the largest firms in St. Louis. She refused to think about it—almost as much as she refused to think about him.

"Anywhere else, Ms. Munroe, you'd be partner by now."

He was right, of course. Irritating man.

He smiled like he could read her thoughts. "You know I'm right. Think about my offer, Ms. Munroe. I'll be in touch."

Clichés

As we said in the basic list, try not to include well-used clichés except every now and then in dialogue. Come up with your own sayings that fit your heroine or hero.

Sentence Construction

Variety is the spice of life. Same goes for genre fiction. Writing sentence after sentence in the same monotonous subject-verb-object construction will bore your reader. Vary your sentence construction and maintain a good balance of dialogue vs. narrative (i.e. white space on every page) and you will have a much better chance of keeping your reader interested.

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

Infuse your writing with vivid, meaningful details. Be specific, but be careful not to bog down your story with unnecessary details. It is a delicate balance, but after you learn this skill, your stories will sparkle.

Remember, if your writing is stale, then the reader will grow bored, and your book will likely end up being a "wall-banger" rather than a "best-seller."

Note: A "wall-banger" is not a sexually explicit story. It refers to a book so rotten that the reader took out his or her frustrations with the lousy story by throwing the book against the wall.



4. Edit your story to make it shine.

Word choice

- To start with, kill most of your adverbs—especially 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. One can walk into a room. One can also burst, saunter, or glide 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

Jumping from place to place or from one point in time to another can be a sure fire way to jar your reader out of the scene. 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 in the scene 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 more about using Scene and Sequel below.)

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. In this day and age, you have to hook readers from the very first line and tug them through the pages at top speed. Sure there are times when you need to slow down enough to let them catch their breaths, but only for a moment here and there.

End Chapters on a Hook

We are back to talking about hooks again. Just as you started your story with a hook that makes the reader want to read more, you need to end each chapter with a hook. This chapter-ending hook needs to make the reader want to turn the page and keep reading rather than turn off the light and go to sleep.

End Scenes with a Hook

Scenes should also end with some kind of hook.

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. In short, 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.

Note: For more information on Scene & Sequel, read Dwight Swain's *Techniques of the Selling Writer* and Jack Bickham's *Scene and Structure*.

Cut, Cut, Cut!

Cut everything that does not move the story forward. This can be painful at times, but you need to read your story line-by-line and ask yourself the following questions for each sentence. If your answer is "no" to either question, get rid of the sentence.

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

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

Learn to stop writing and step back, 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 be drawn into it, become invested in it, take ownership of it, and they will take more pleasure in it.

7. Think GMC 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. According to Debra Dixon in her book, *GMC: Goal, Motivation, and Conflict*, each of your scenes should serve at least three purposes, and one purpose **must** have something to do with your character's goal(s). If you have a scene that is not pulling its weight, chances are it is 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 push it and ask her to buy into a relationship (or any action in your story) that has not been properly motivated. Without the proper motivating stimulus evoking a reaction, you risk irritating your reader. You want an interested reader not an irritated one!

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 about that vital goal the protagonist will be pursuing. You want your reader to latch on (that hook thing again!) and journey with you to the end of your book to find the answer.

In addition to the overall story question, each of your characters (primary and secondary) should have their own story questions that may or may not be related to the book or heroine's story question. This gives your readers more reason to care what happens to each and every character—even the jerks and villains.

Also, make sure you have enough at stake with each character's story question to make the overall story compelling. This character's goal shouldn't come easily.



Compelling fiction is filled with strife. Get your character up a tree and throw rocks at her.

The reader, the contest judge, and the editor or agent will all be reading your first page with the hope that you will make her care. That is your job as author— **Make the reader care.**

10. Trust yourself. Trust your voice.

It is YOUR author's voice. Do not let other people (and this includes well-intentioned critique partners) dilute your voice. Think of your favorite author and the way his/her writing sings on the page. Let your writing sing in your voice, your words, your sentence construction. Trust yourself and write your story. And let it shine.

Contact Information

Feel free to contact either of us with any questions or thoughts or comments.

- Ann Charles: ann@anncharles.com
- Wendy Delaney: wendy@wendydelaney.com



Appendix A—Tips from Mystery Author J.A. Konrath

"Tips for the First Chapter" provided with permission from J.A. Konrath (website: <http://www.jakonrath.com/tips.html>).

The first chapter is often the most important in the book. A good first chapter will make an agent, editor, and buyer take notice. A poor first chapter will make them reach for something else.

Here are some tips on what to look for in your novel's beginning.

TIPS FOR THE FIRST CHAPTER

1. Make sure the first chapter starts with action.
2. Show, don't tell. This means you don't need a one-paragraph description of a bedroom, a character's thoughts on everything, and for god's sake don't put any back story in the first chapter.
3. Keep it short. It doesn't have to be James Patterson short, but a ten-page first chapter is better than a thirty-page first chapter when it comes to grabbing attention.
4. Watch your POV...try to stick in one character's mind for the whole chapter.
5. Cut everything that doesn't move the action forward. EVERYTHING. If it moves the story forward, or gives us a better feel for the characters, put it in a later chapter, but not the first. Leave the reader wanting more, not knowing everything.
6. You probably don't need a prologue. Editors often cut them, and readers often skip them. Try to remove it and see if the story suffers. If you really believe you need one, don't make it longer than a few pages.
7. And this is the most important—trust yourself. You've been writing since you were four. You know how to craft a sentence. Not everything needs to be rewritten—sometimes it comes out right the first time.

Appendix B—More Tips

Following are websites where you can find great writing tips from some published authors.

Tips from Jennifer Crusie

"Don't Do This At Home: The Four Biggest Mistakes in Contest Entries" written by Jennifer Crusie, found on her website:

<http://jennycrusie.com/essays/dontdothisathome.php>

(This essay was originally published in *Romance Writer's Report*. Oct 2001.)

Tips from Sally Zigmond

"The Top Ten Mistakes New Fiction Authors Make" written by Sally Zigmond, found on the Writers-World website:

<http://www.writing-world.com/fiction/mistakes.shtml>



Bibliography

Ann Charles

Ann Charles writes mysteries full of mayhem and fun. Ann has a B.A. in English with an emphasis on creative writing from the University of Washington. A former Golden Heart and Pacific Northwest Writers Association Literary Contest finalist, she has been a member of the Greater Seattle RWA chapter for many moons. Ann has written several contemporary novels and is currently toiling away on her next while her agent works on selling her manuscripts.

Wendy Delaney

Former Golden Heart finalist and Emerald City Opener winner, Wendy Delaney writes chick lit mysteries. She has been an RWA member since 1997 and has served the Greater Seattle RWA chapter as Tape Librarian, Secretary, Treasurer, Conference Chair, and is this year's Emerald City Writers' Conference Program/Production Chair.

J.A. Konrath

J.A. Konrath is the writer of the Lt. Jacqueline "Jack" Daniels thriller series, of which DIRTY MARTINI is the latest. He's published stories and articles in a variety of publications. You can visit him at his website (<http://www.jakonrath.com>), or you can just Google "Konrath" and you'll find him.

Dean Koontz

When he was a senior in college, Dean Koontz won an Atlantic Monthly fiction competition and has been writing ever since. His books are published in 38 languages. He has sold 325,000,000 copies, a figure that currently increases by more than 17 million copies per year. Visit his website for more information (<http://www.deankoontz.com>).

Terry McLaughlin

RITA® finalist and Romantic Times Reviewers' Choice Award nominee Terry McLaughlin spends several hours each day dreaming of lingering kisses and happy endings—and several hours more writing down the best parts of her fantasies for Harlequin Superromance. A former teacher of an eclectic range of subjects from Architecture to World History at grade levels from Kindergarten to college, she lives with her husband on a tiny ranch in the midst of the redwoods in Northern California.

Marianne Stillings

Marianne Stillings first published in 2004. Since then, she's released four more books (with a sixth on the way). She's loved stories with happy endings since she was three years old and her mother read her The Little Golden Book of *The Ugly Duckling*. Originally from California, Marianne lives in the Pacific Northwest, works for Boeing by day, writes at night, and is the single mom of two fantastic daughters (and a new son-in-law), and two big goofy dogs.

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