

# THE TEACHER'S EDITION

*Afterschool Sessions with Our Favorite Teachers—by Ann Charles*

Hello, everybody. I've set out to interview some of my favorite writing teachers and learn more about them as teachers, not just as authors.

Today, I'm staying after class to talk with: Chris Roerden

Chris Roerden began her publishing career more than 40 years ago, learning her editing skills as an understudy to talented and experienced New York manuscript editors and eventually working her way up to managing editor. She received her B.A. in English summa cum laude from the University of Maine-Portland, where she was subsequently hired as a writing instructor. After earning her M.A. in English, she began to mentor independent study writing students, which convinced her that writing could be most effectively taught through what she calls "one-on-one coaching and a gentle but instructive process of editing."

In 1983, she started her own editing business and has since become one of the foremost freelance editors in the country. She initiated the first outreach program in publishing at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and for 8 years led a series of evening classes on the book industry and how to use "market savvy" to become published. Similar classes were conducted at Alverno College and various writer's conferences, and she has spoken at publishers' conventions throughout the country on streamlining the editorial process.

From leading workshops to serving on the board of Mystery Writers of America's Southeast region, Chris has devoted her life to helping writers reach their goals and potential. She has edited more than 1000 book manuscripts, written 50 plus articles, and been included in the pages of *Who's Who in American Women* since 1991. Her most recent contributions to aspiring authors are two very helpful and informative books on self-editing called *Don't Murder Your Mystery* and *Don't Sabotage Your Submission*.

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Okay, let's get down to business.

## **1. What is your take on the mystery market today?**

I could say it's all a mystery—but publishers ARE being more cautious than usual, as is true in every industry. Hard cover sales are down, not surprisingly, yet mysteries remain popular, not only for escapism but also for the reader's need to see justice prevail. The desire to live in a just world, even vicariously, is especially strong today, when for every

crooked financier who's caught, a hundred remain free and enjoy undeserved bonuses.

The brightest hope for writers, especially new writers, is that well-written manuscripts will always be noticed, always rise above the average, and always have a better chance of becoming published. The most frequent advice writers are given is that publication takes "persistence." Yet reducing a complex process to this single word has led some writers I know to apply "persistence" to repeatedly submitting the same writing, as if the odds of succeeding were like repeatedly buying lottery tickets.

Let's associate persistence with some of the other factors involved, such as market research. Every year, hundreds of thousands of submissions are rejected simply because they are sent to agents and publishers who don't handle the genre—and make no secret of what genres they do handle. And let's associate persistence with continuing to learn the craft, so the quality of the writing submitted is outstanding. Of the many factors involved in becoming published, most are under the control of the writer.

**2. After 40+ years of editing, do you still find editing manuscripts exciting?**

Absolutely! Even more exciting now than ever, because I keep seeing more top-notch writing. Although every manuscript can benefit from a certain amount of developmental editing and line editing, the "fresh, new voice" that's become almost a cliché today definitely stands out from the average.

**3. What is the difference between a manuscript critique, edit, and Market-Savvy edit?**

A critique is not in any way an edit. A critique is feedback about the strengths and weaknesses seen in a manuscript, such as, "Make the protagonist more sympathetic in chapter 2," or "increase the pacing toward the end of chapter 12." The writer has to figure out how and where a comment might be applied. An edit, on the other hand, offers a wealth of specific suggestions, written directly on the manuscript, that demonstrate where and how a specific improvement might be inserted or rephrased—if, of course, the writer agrees with the suggestion.

I want to emphasize that every edit is a suggestion. Writers can accept it, reject it, or—best of all—analyze it to see why the editor stopped reading at that point and felt impelled to offer a comment. At a conference I often sit down with writers individually to go over my edits to their 10- or 12-page samples, and I love to witness how some writers catch on to a problem right away and make a note of how they will create their own solution.

A market-savvy edit, to me, involves recommendations that go beyond the critique and the edit, such as how to satisfy market expectations for the genre, how to find an agent, and what steps to anticipate next.

**4. What do you believe is the biggest problem for writers when it comes to creating a sellable manuscript?**

Not having read my books for writers? Seriously, I say this not because I'm trying to make my publisher happier than he is already, but because writers who assume they have nothing to learn from others in this industry reveal either ignorance or arrogance. In my experience, arrogance is the biggest problem: "My manuscript is so good I don't have to bother about mechanics," or "Guidelines are for fools, not me." What kind of role model is the successfully published president of a major organization for writers who—when asked in an online interview to name her favorite book about writing—replied, "I never read books about writing"? There's hope for the ignorant, but the egotist or snob loses respect.

Voice is what makes the one manuscript in a hundred stand out, and while I believe that everyone has a voice, most writers strangle theirs. They use the same old ineffective techniques and habits of craft that guarantee their submissions won't be read past the first one or two pages. To the experienced editor, the sound of amateur writing is like hearing an old "78" recording played on a 33 rpm turntable.

**5. What is your least favorite part of editing a manuscript? What is your favorite part?**

My least favorite part is writing my own editorial letter, because I weigh every word, knowing how easy it is to hurt and discourage writers, especially when they see the amount of work ahead of them to make their novel sellable. I should add, though, that I make gazillions of editorial suggestions on everyone's manuscript.

My favorite part of editing is discovering a writer with real promise. It's rare to come across a clear, fresh, uncluttered voice, irrespective of the amount of revision the writer faces. Even the promising writer gets a gazillion editorial suggestions.

**6. What clues show that a manuscript is unpolished and amateur?**

There's the opening that fails to keep the reader hooked because backstory and description are allowed to intrude way too early. I've come to realize that many writers cannot identify their own backstory. Another dead giveaway to amateur or average writing is the unimaginative selection of gestures that overload most manuscripts. Characters are constantly turning, pausing, walking, looking, smiling, sitting down, standing up, shrugging their (redundant) shoulders and nodding their (redundant) heads.

These activities aren't action; they're tics and fidgets. Action in fiction is conflict, whether internal or external, physical, emotional, or psychological. Besides the hobbled hook and juvenile gestures, my books examine more than two dozen additional clues that signal average, unimaginative craft.

The unpolished manuscript is rarely seen by the agent or acquiring editor for whom it's intended, because first readers have the responsibility of screening out amateur material as rapidly as possible. A quick glance shows less-than-professional presentation: formatting, mechanics, and the disregard of preferences stated in each recipient's submission guidelines. In other words, many rejections occur without anyone even reading the writing.

**7. In your book, *Don't Sabotage Your Submission*, you speak of "density" as "using the same story element for more than one purpose." Will you give an example of what you mean by *density*?**

Density is a quality valued in mystery, as well as in other forms of literature and art, in which the writer selects characters, behaviors, and other elements for their ability to do double and triple duty. Dialogue, for instance, can reveal aspects of each speaker's character, convey information to advance the plot, portray speech patterns that suggest a character's background, education, and place of origin, and more. The way Val McDermid describes Scardale in *A Place of Execution* goes beyond the simple furnishing of a setting for the action. Her details set the eerie mood that pervades the novel, establish a cold, insular community of villagers, reflect their secretive behaviors, and hamper an investigation into the truth.

**8. At what point in the manuscript-writing process should an author consider having his/her manuscript professionally edited? Early during the learning of the craft? Later, when the need to break out of the midlist quagmire becomes 'do or die'?**

A thorough, professional edit can cost quite a lot, so my general recommendation is to seek it later because that's when motivation is higher. Ann, you cite a very strong motivator: the need to break out of the midlist. There's also the need to break into it again under a pseudonym after having one's first contract terminated. A third motivator is receiving rejection after rejection and not knowing why.

I could make an argument for the value of editing in the early learning stage, but years ago when I taught freshman composition someone advised me to correct only a few things on each assigned paper, not everything. Since assignments recur over a semester, learning continues, or so we hope. The full-length manuscript is different. Receiving so much editing all at once, major and minor issues together, can be many times more overwhelming. If I were to hold back and comment on only the major issues, I'd be depriving the writer of what might be the only edit his or her manuscript ever receives.

I think the experienced writer might be more likely than the inexperienced writer to handle a full-scale, thorough edit and absorb more of what the editor offers. Still, I remind all writers that every edit is a suggestion.

**9. Do you work with authors who want to self publish, publish with a small press, or publish through an e-publisher?**

I work with self-publishers who can demonstrate a realistic understanding of the marketing involved—which is why my intake questionnaire asks for the self-publisher's marketing plan. The willingness of other editors to tackle whatever someone is willing to pay for, regardless of whether it will help reach the author's goals, strikes me as unethical.

Writers who contact me say they plan to either self-publish or submit to an agent or royalty publisher. Very few say, at the outset, that they plan to go with a small press or e-publisher. As for e-books, not every manuscript is able to take full advantage of the technology. E-publishing is really great for nonfiction, when the editor understands how to use the technology to facilitate reading, chunking, linking for cross-referencing, standardizing terms to enhance searching (a function that replaces indexing), and anticipating updating.

**10. What should an author look for in a professional editor? Are there any warning flags to be aware of when searching for a potential editor-for-hire?**

Look for a track record of edited books published in your genre. Avoid editors who tell you they edit "anything"—they're unlikely to know the expectations for every genre and subgenre. I'd also avoid editors who are willing to do only proofreading, because a conscientious, qualified editor knows it's impossible to read proof without finding dozens of things crying out for editing. Professionals cannot afford to do a great job of editing if they're charging only for proofing, so one way or another, the writer loses.

**11. You have been teaching writing classes and workshops for years. What are some of the difficulties with teaching writers?**

The first university where I was an instructor I discovered that writing cannot be taught, but information and awareness can. So I created a series of interactive workshops to help writers analyze different ways of writing and learn to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each approach to craft. I enjoy seeing writers catch on to what's effective and what's less effective as we examine essential techniques: point of view, description in action, insightful body language, showing not telling, power dialogue, tags vs. beats—and so on. How techniques are used contributes to the writer's voice.

The difficulties I see are related to writers woefully underestimating the workings of the industry. They have little business experience, having worked primarily as employees, not entrepreneurs, so they have no idea of what it takes to get a publisher to invest in bringing their first story or family memoir to the public. Also, I'm understanding, more and more, that most new writers simply cannot recognize backstory, theirs or someone else's.

**12. Do you help authors with marketing plans as well as manuscript edits?**

If they want me to, yes, but only after I edit the full manuscript. I often edit a synopsis or rewrite a query letter, deleting most of the plot description but adding something intriguing that the writer didn't think to mention. Sometimes I recommend that a writer not self-publish, or do self-publish as a first choice.

**13. Tell us about your newest book, *Don't Sabotage Your Submission*.**

It's a success! I'm thrilled, and immensely grateful to the writers who tell their critique groups to get their own copies! Wherever I present a workshop, every copy sells out, and the onsite booksellers always buy more from the supply I just happen to carry with me. Charlene Harris and Carolyn Hart recommend the book, and Reed Farrel Coleman and Vicki Lane make it required reading for the fiction-writing courses they teach at major universities. And *Don't Sabotage Your Submission* was just named a finalist for ForeWord Magazine's Writing Book of the Year.

Okay, to come down from the ceiling, I ought to explain that the new book is the expanded version of *Don't Murder Your Mystery*, which won the Agatha Award and was nominated for the Macavity and Anthony. When sales of *Don't Murder* soared, it was picked up by the Writer's Digest Book Club, and my publisher, Bella Rosa Books, asked me to rewrite it for all writers in any genre.

So my two *Don't* books are almost the same, but *Don't Sabotage* does offer some new information and 130 new examples. Writers are stepped through an examination of a total of 230 excerpts from the work of 215 authors, each demonstrating a key technique its author uses effectively that most writers use ineffectively. There are so many more options than writers realize for creating more powerful dialogue, description, setting, twists, and so on. Best of all, writers learn to get rid of the clues that cause manuscripts to be rejected quickly, without being read.

I should add that most of the material I use in my workshops is different from the examples in my books, which are probably the only books about writing that make no mention of *Moby Dick* or *A Tale of Two Cities*. I prefer to point to contemporary fiction, mostly mystery. Incidentally, I'm about to post a call for submissions for the next publication I write. I'll post it on my Amazon blog on April 15, to sweeten the sting of tax day. The shortcut URL is <http://snurl.com/9esdq>; then scroll down to my photo.

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You can read more about Chris on her website:

<http://www.marketsavvybookediting.com/> (where you can also go to contact her).

Thank you, Chris, for sharing your time with all of us Guppies; and thanks to all of you Guppies for reading along! If any of you have a particular "teacher" you would like me to interview, please email me with his or her name and any other helpful information.

Until the next after-school session...

Ann Charles  
Mystery, Mayhem, and Fun in the Sun!

*Written by Ann Charles, this essay was originally published in First Draft, May 2009.*



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