

Elaine Cougler presents

10 Ways to Improve Your Writing

A collection of On Becoming a Wordsmith blog posts

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Writing Tip One

How To Start Your Novel

“Oh, I could never do that I just wouldn’t be able to stick to writing for that long.” Have you ever heard that from your friends and relatives? When I finally ‘fessed up and started actually talking about my writing, quite a few people were impressed with the commitment I had shown. I didn’t know whether to be pleased or insulted but have come to realize that, to many, writing seems just too hard; hence, their comments.

When I finally know what I’m going to write about the words just seem to come. Oh, I’ll be revising for months, but the initial sitting down to the keyboard and letting my fingers do their thing is about the best part of the whole process. For me the part leading up to actual writing has always been the hardest. Do I make an outline? How do I start the first paragraph? What part of all the history do I include?

Just now I am at the beginning of the sequel to *The Loyalist’s Wife*, and I’ve started to delve. I go on the Internet and look up places for the setting, trying to find out the details for my particular time period (early 1800’s for novel number two). I cut and paste snippets and print them with their sources. I let myself wander off topic, which is so easy to do on the Internet, because I might just find out some little thing that will end up in my novel. I try to breathe in the time period and all that was happening both in my setting (Niagara) and in the rest of the world. These bits help me to develop characters who are realistic. I want them to just step out of the research and into my novel.

I go to the library and source out books about the time and place as well as to other history preservers. There is a great museum in Niagara-on-the-Lake which has been very helpful. There are old forts, such as Fort George and Fort Niagara,

where I can walk where people walked two hundred years ago. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then walking the walk is priceless. I remember being at Fort Niagara in New York State and standing in a guard tower overlooking Lake Ontario. Imprinted in the wood was the direction and distance to Fort York in York (Toronto) and Fort Mississauga. I had never heard of the latter. Yesterday when browsing on the web I found out that it still stands near Niagara-on-the-Lake. This will be a research trip for my husband and me, for sure.

Characters need to be developed. I have a character sheet which I received as a handout at one of the writing courses I took. On it I fill in the blanks and watch my people come to life. They need to be believable so I give them good traits but also less admirable characteristics. John, my hero in *The Loyalist's Wife*, is a man of good character but is impetuous. He shoots an Indian fighting on his own side to stop him scalping an enemy boy.

Before I start writing, I need to rough out my plot line. I don't want to know the whole thing but get down an idea of where I'm going. A time line has been very helpful with this as I'm writing historical fiction and need to match the fictional parts to the actual historical fact.

When I feel that I know my characters and my general direction for the novel, I just have to start writing. Finding that first sentence can be hard. It has to hook the reader (and the writer) into going further. A bell has to ring in the head. Hmm. What, where, why, when or how questions should pop into the brain. Once I get started I just keep writing about three pages a day. Amazingly, that pace will result in a rough manuscript in about four months.



Writing Tip Two

7 Reasons to Write With an Outline

Writing essays and short stories as a high school student and even in university, I was able to jot down my research and ideas in no particular order and then just start to write. And as I wrote I referred to my jumble of notes, ticking off each idea as I incorporated it into the work. My brain seemed to be capable of holding the whole thing in there without a detailed plan. And that's how I started writing *The Loyalist's Wife*. A year later I had what would surely be the next best book to read on anyone's list.

If only my writing had been as great as my ego.

Today book two is screaming to get out of my head but I am following a different plan of attack. Squeezed in with preparing for a great agent conference in three weeks and fixing up the minor improvements suggested by my editor, I am following a plan to get book two out a whole lot faster. I am outlining.

7 Reasons Why:

- 1.** The outline helps me to see where the story arc is and, indeed, if I have a story arc with rising action.
- 2.** If I know where the story is going, I can insert seemingly insignificant details which later on will play a part in the plot.
- 3.** I can see at a glance the timeline in my historical facts and easily interweave my fictional characters' lives.
- 4.** The actual writing will go much faster as I'll know where my characters are going and what their respective problems could be.
- 5.** Starting each day's work will be easy as I'll have my roadmap beside me and know my characters' journey. That blank page will not be so daunting.

6. I won't have so many problems wondering if I already had my hero shoot that intruder or if I just dreamed it.
7. If I have to take an unforeseen break for a week or two, God forbid, I will still know where the story is going and how far I've come.

So here I am, proof positive, that you can teach an old dame new tricks. Time to get back to my outline.



Writing Tip Three

10 Steps To Your Bestseller

For those who love lists, print this out and check off as you complete each item. Your book is sure to be a winner. Move over J.K. Rowling!

1. First you need something to write about. Pick a topic that interests you—you'll be with it a long time.
2. Research your topic. This could be a long process (for a historical) or short for something set in modern day which only needs the best type of men's undershorts researched. Or the way to thread a needle.
3. Plot, setting, characters, and overall theme come next. Who are your people, what are they doing, how are they changing, what is their message to those millions of readers soon to beat down your door?
4. A rough draft takes anywhere from a few weeks (if you're locking yourself in a room till it's done) to a year (if you work consistently a few hours a day.)
5. Make extra digital copies, give one to your sister to hold for you, maybe even print out one copy, and then take a holiday. Go spellunking or rainbow-searching. Do anything but look at that draft for at least two or three weeks.

6. Depending on how masochistic you are, this next step is fun or torture: revision. Now is the time to hone those phrases, check details, re-tune your dialogue ear and just make the manuscript the best you can make it.
7. Rewrites come next and there may be one or a hundred and one, although for your sake, I hope it's the former. (Sounds a lot like number 6, doesn't it?)
8. Send your baby out to readers. Not your best friends, unless they understand the process, or your spouse, as that could be the basis of another plot that might not be pleasant. Find people who know about writing and will tell you the truth (but in a constructive way.)
9. Acting on all the advice, you finally write your final draft. Don't let the word *final* fool you. I've written about six of these for my historical. The file names are something like *msfinal*, *msfinalpostvictoria*, *msreallyfinal*, *msabsolutelyfinalorillkillmyself*. You get the drift.
10. Publish. This is just one word on purpose. To make you think it's as easy as digging into a fresh-off-the-barbecue steak after you've prepared it. In reality, this may be the hardest step, but publish traditionally, self-publish, e-publish or do a combination of all three, Just get it out there for people to read, or what's the book for?



Writing Tip Four

7 Ways to Make Your Writing Shine



We hardly ever use our tub, preferring the walk-in shower, but I keep cleaning the tub. And I love that tub. When I clean it faithfully, it shines and shines. Kind of like writing. If you practice and practice, the words become all shiny and bright,

bringing a glow each time they're read.

I have to remind myself of that and make time for rewrites, even when I do a short blog post like this one. Oh, you'll find the occasional typo or other error when I've just not checked as closely as I should or despite my best efforts my eyes have missed something. But most days, my post is error-free and, I hope, an interesting read.

Writing a novel is a little like cleaning house. If you keep putting off all the revisions that deep down you know need to be done (like destroying spider webs drifting in the slanting sunshine) you'll never have that shining book. If you know there is a problem with your opening scene or your main character is just a little flat, fix it. Buckle down and rewrite the sucker, even though it takes days or weeks. Sigh.

Here are 7 Ways to Make Your Writing Shine

- 1.** Check that your verbs are active and that you haven't got caught in a web of "to be" words. Even though Hamlet used it with great results—he was talking about suicide, for Heaven's sakes—the verb "to be" can make for dull prose.
- 2.** Make your characters real; that is, not perfect. Do you know anyone who is perfect? I don't. And yet we like and even love these people, perhaps *because* of their idiosyncrasies. They make us feel good because, like us, they have faults. If misery loves company, so does imperfection.
- 3.** Polish up your sentences. Vary their length. Give your reader a break from long, drawn-out lists of thoughts and feelings and mountain scenes and rivers and solitary goats tripping along beside babbling brooks, their whiskers dripping with sparkling drops of nectar from the gods. Wow. Isn't that sentence nasty? On so many levels? Of course, I exaggerate but you get the point. Do you see how fast your eyes moved over the two short bursts at the start of this point? And got absolutely bogged down with the

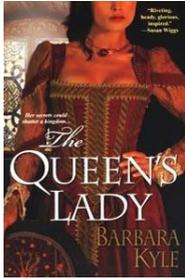
long one? The judicious varying of sentence length and type will work wonders for your prose.

- 4.** Learn the correct usage of “it’s” and “its”. Here I go again harping on this one. If you are a writer you want to be able to use the language properly and join the ranks of those of us who decry its desecration. (Did you notice its?) It’s a shame to see talented and educated people misuse these two forms. For a lesson [check out this post where I ranted about this one other day](http://elainecougler.wordpress.com/2011/07/03/its-and-its-bits/). (<http://elainecougler.wordpress.com/2011/07/03/its-and-its-bits/>)
- 5.** Study the artful use of dialogue to enliven your story, to show characters at their worst or their best, and to make scenes real. Many good books on writing devote chapters to dialogue. One example is *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* which has chapters entitled Dialogue Mechanics, See How it Sounds, Interior Monologue, and Easy Beats, among others. I think I’ll go back and read those again, now that I see them once more.
- 6.** Voice. Your voice as a writer. This one has been as ethereal as that floating cobweb back up a few paragraphs. For me, anyway. Anne Lamott explains it well in *bird by bird* in the chapter entitled—what else?—Finding Your Voice. Get her book, read it, reread it, take it to bed with you, read it until the ink starts coming off the pages.
- 7.** Forgive yourself. Yes, I know, that’s a strange one but if you tend to be on the perfectionist side, you’re going to get awfully angry with yourself at times. When you realize you should have done a major plan of some sort before you actually started writing. When you forget to follow the formatting rules for a submission and get lambasted by a writing professional. Or when you realize that short story you spent a week developing is just utter crap. Forgive yourself and then find the way to overcome the latest obstacle. Time to take a good long soak in that shiny tub.



Writing Tip Five

7 Things I Learned from Barbara Kyle's Course



I first found award-winning and prolific author, Barbara Kyle, online. I digested the free materials, a series of videos with Barbara teaching writing, and then was happy to pay the low price of \$10 for access to the rest for a whole year. At the time, I had completed my first draft and was getting feedback that told me I needed to know more. On the web, I found Barbara. She's a Canadian, lives in the Toronto area, and had been an actor for twenty years before starting to write, all characteristics that drew me to her.

And then I read her first book set in Tudor England, a period I've loved for thirty years. That led me to take a face-to-face course with Barbara where we discussed each participant's first thirty pages over two days as well as had private time with Barbara. That was excellent for talking one-on-one about my book and my hopes for it. I took the course again a couple of weeks ago with my second book and was happy to realize I had learned a lot in the interim.

7 Things I Learned from Barbara Kyle's Course

- 1.** Barbara starts her book with writing a few sentences about where the book is going. She keeps adding to this framework as she thinks and researches, changing where warranted, until she finally has about 30 pages. These pages might very well be called the synopsis of her novel. Once she has completed this she starts fleshing out the whole book.
- 2.** During the course of the weekend we writers learned the difference between the use of a dash (—) and an ellipsis (...). In dialogue, the dash means the speech has been interrupted. An ellipsis means the speaker just

runs out of words. “Take the cat out and cut off its—” as opposed to “Take the cat out and cut off its...” The first would be followed by the interruption and the second would be followed by virtually nothing.

- 3.** Overwrite your main character at first to get a good feeling for what and who she is, Barbara says. You can always cut back in subsequent drafts. I thought that was great advice as critics often tell me they want to know more about my characters. This is a good way to overcome that problem.
- 4.** When planning out your book, Barbara told me, think of having five big scenes. That was amazing to me as I have sometimes been guilty of writing episodes rather than having the whole plot planned out in the beginning. So there. Now I know that a book such as mine should have about 5 major scenes. If I have those as the bare bones, then I can easily flesh them out, writing with the goal of getting to and from those scenes.
- 5.** Give specific details for the reader to better visualize the setting. I had used “the trilling of *birds*” and “I wish you would let me give you *more*, Lucy.” Barbara, and others in the group, suggested telling what kind of birds and certainly wanted to know what the ‘more’ might be. And she dinged me for using “*small* cabins” as small is just too vague. Excellent advice, again.
- 6.** I struggled with how much detail from the first book needed to be in the second book as each book must be able to stand on its own. Readers must be able to read any book in the series and not feel lost because of references they don’t know. Barbara showed me that I still needed to flesh out characters and their motives in book two. The reader needs to know enough. This is a fine line to walk, indeed, and I am still out there on the high wire.
- 7.** Barbara talked about managing point of view in one of my scenes where my character, Lucy, is lying in the mud outside her cabin, having collapsed, so weak was she from her illness, but desperately needing to get help for her small son. I started out talking about the empty parade ground and sensible people being inside but my words were more like a narrator’s

than Lucy's. I need to go back and think what Lucy would see as she lies almost senseless in the mud and then describe that.

The writers among my readers will see just why I was so excited when I drove home, exhausted, from Toronto that Sunday night. I knew where to go with my novel in order to make it better. I knew and I started the next morning.



Writing Tip Six

Don't Pamper Your Heroes



Give your hero or heroine huge and even insurmountable problems and then give them more. Make their journey harder and harder.

Where else in life are we given these instructions? Most of us want to help, as we have been taught. We want to make others' lives better, especially for those we love or respect.

This attitude translates into our first fiction forays where we paint perfect people eminently qualified to be heroes or heroines in our books. The trouble is, perfection is annoying if not downright boring.

We are not perfect and we actually identify more readily with people who, like us, have flaws along with their good characteristics. And this drawing of imperfect heroes helps us believe we could be the heroic person at the center of a novel.

Want to interest the reader? Take a character the reader relates to and put that character in jeopardy. Heck, put them in double jeopardy. If the stakes are high and escalate, the reader will be bleary-eyed from lack of sleep, ensuring that they'll tell others about your book. Donald Maass talks about the breakout premise, about something which sets your storyline apart from the masses and makes it break out. ([http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/)

[/158297182X/qid=1066253256/sr=1-1/ref=sr_1_1/102-1150185-](#)

[0939337?v=glance&s=books](#)) Creating high stakes over and over will add so much to your novel, as to work hand in hand with the breakout premise.

So pamper yourself. Go have a spa day, buy yourself those amazing shoes or that expensive book, but **don't, I repeat, don't pamper your heroes!**



Writing Tip Seven

Do You Follow the Novel Rules?

As children in the playground we learned pretty quickly what might happen if we didn't follow the rules. We heard "You can't play with us!" "Freak!" or, sometimes, we even ended up with blood-stained shirts. The group had its code and woe betide the brave boy or girl who thought to break it.

Now we've grown up and our playground is the world, but there are still rules. Especially for writers. We have a titanic iceberg with very slippery slopes to climb if we want to get published. Fortunately, countless books on writing and the Internet, itself, are awash with suggestions on how to do this. Here is the structure (set of rules) to use for your novel.

Five Essential Elements in Your Novel

- 1.** Your characters must have **motivation**, be in some kind of **conflict**, which results in a great **tension**.
- 2.** An **inciting incident** must serve as the catalyst to get your plot moving and your readers interested.
- 3.** A **story question** such as "Will Scarlett survive the war and find happiness?" is essential and, of course, self-centered Scarlett has an

epiphany. She finally realizes she must rely on herself and finds the strength to do this.

- 4.** And this is all leading up to a **black moment, a climax** for the main character in your novel. If we don't give these characters supreme hardships, there is nothing to keep the reader's interest and nothing to overcome. We readers love to cheer our heroes from the sidelines as they swashbuckle their demons.
- 5.** And win. That's the **satisfying ending** we are all looking for when we start the book. The protagonist must grow as he or she conquers challenges to become a better, happier or smarter person. And the ending must answer the readers' questions without becoming long-winded and, dare I say it?, boring.

Well, loosely, those are the rules for writing your novel, folks. Sounds easy, doesn't it?



Writing Tip Eight

7 Ways to Keep a Positive Writing Outlook



Whether you're a seasoned professional or just getting started in this business, you probably have days where you think you can never do it Everybody does Here are some practical little steps to take that will help you succeed.

- 1. Feed your creative soul often by looking at beautiful things.** Use a microscope to find the inner beauty in a piece of apple skin or touch a scarf out of the softest yarn you can find. Revel in the tactile beauty.

- 2. Set yourself up for success every day.** On your to-do list put easy as well as hard writing chores to do and cross them off as you finish. Lots of crossing off makes you see how much you are doing, thus warming you up to do more.
- 3. Sign up for Twitter and find other writers.** You won't feel so isolated. They know the drill and they'll make you laugh as they tell their stories. Get out and connect.
- 4. Find a writing group either online or in person.** You can see what others are writing and learn from the group's discussions.
- 5. Go to conferences and connect with other writers.** I've been to two conferences this year, both of which have energized me. I've met editors and agents, published authors and wannabes, and the whole process has helped me hunker down and do yet another edit. (Misery loves company?)
- 6. Set goals for your long pieces and stick to them.** Eventually you'll finish. I mean the kind of goals where you say you'll write 2 hours a day, not the kind where you say you'll have a book written in a year. Make the goal small and attainable and the larger goal will just happen.
- 7. Surround yourself with positive, successful people in the writing world and tell yourself you can make it, too.** If you work hard enough, you can. I cannot stress this one enough. Get away from the naysayers and those who don't feed your creative soul.



Writing Tip Nine

Mapping a Historical Novel

Does a historical need a map? The short answer? Sometimes yes and sometimes no.

I know that's not really an answer but let me continue. My novel is just under 100,000 words, not long in the style of [Sharon Kay Penman](#) or [Colleen McCullough](#). But it's long enough to tell my characters' Revolutionary War story. John and Lucinda both do some trekking around the State of New York, enough that I started to get confused as to just where the action was taking place. Did John go east or north? Was that Seneca village to the west? Where exactly was the river they traveled on to get to their cabin in the woods?

I scoured the Internet and the local library for period maps and had it all pretty well worked out. Of course that was when I started my writing journey four years ago and, while I have learned a lot, written much more, and sourced out wonderful help along the way, that initial trail in my head has become somewhat overgrown. What I didn't do was make my map at the start. I thought I'd remember it all. Not so much. Now, as I am honing in on my final revisions before editors take over, I rue the day I decided not to make my own map. So when does a historical not need a map? Perhaps when the plot is not so centered around actual battles or the treacherous paths one's characters take. Mine needs those details because the setting is so tied to the action.

In the next couple of days I will be rereading for the thirty-second time and mapping exactly where my characters go. And that map will be part of my book.



Writing Tip Ten

Craig Pyette - Get Your Novel Accepted by an Editor



Have you ever wanted just to sit down with a senior editor and ask what it is they want? Do your eyes glaze over when yet another query letter is answered with “thanks, but no thanks”?

You've worked and worked at your submission, followed all the suggestions given to you and, while you wait for query replies, your non-nails are red and raw with worry.

Self-doubt is your closest companion, so much so that your spouse suggests there isn't room for all three of you in the marriage bed.

Me, too.

And that's why I went to a workshop given by Craig Pyette, [a senior editor at Random House of Canada Limited](#), through [The Writers' Community of Durham Region](#).

I wanted to hear yet another person in the business explain just what is in the elusive pot at the end of the writing rainbow. And more importantly, how writers might reach it. Could I dip in for some goodies?

We writers need these experiences to help us along the way to publication but even knowing there are hundreds of answers to the How do I get published? question, we still keep looking for that one key, that open sesame abracadabra that will make our dreams reality.

Craig Mentioned These Points For Writers To Do:

- 1.** Keep the voice consistent with each character and his/her sensibilities. A character talking about his didgeridoo will be unbelievable if he has no connection with Australia.
- 2.** Check to see if the voice of different characters' chapters is consistent with that character. My Irish-born visitor to Lucy's farm speaks with an Irish turn of phrase. Lucy, born in Boston to English parents, cannot.
- 3.** Write sentences for impact, ending on the point that really matters. Don't end with the contextual information in the sentence. Bad: Lucy rammed the rifle into the man's chest after he had dared to suggest she go with him. Better: "I'd be glad to take a pretty thing like you with me, you know." Lucy rammed the rifle into the man's chest. "Get off my land!"

4. Craig says to let him/her (the reader) slow down and get into the character's shoes in the first pages. This sets a base for the unfolding of the story.
5. He wants to see a fresh take on something people care about, indelible characters, a strong voice, a great story, prose that's up to the task of telling that story, and a writer who has become an authority on his/her subject.

Points For Writers To Avoid:

1. The reader must not be bewildered. Craig says if he doesn't get what is happening, probably others won't either.
2. Boredom is to be avoided at all cost. If the writer sets up a scene where something great is going to happen and then it doesn't, the reader is bored and disappointed.
3. Writers need to avoid explaining their suspense. They must decide how much the reader must be kept in suspense, and then follow through. Keep your hand on the throttle, so to speak, with a clear destination in mind.
4. If an anecdote doesn't really attach to the story arc, should it be there? Probably not. Would the reader miss it if it weren't there?
5. Avoid putting in extraneous material. Boil down to the little moments that actually affect the reader's reading of your book and the understanding of your story.

Helpful Items For Writers to Consider:

1. Taste is a big thing in whether your novel is picked up. We all have favorite subjects, writers, places. Editors do, too, and they affect whether a particular editor will be interested in your book.
2. As do writers and a host of other writing-oriented people, editors learn on the job. They do this by reading and reflecting on great books. I surmise

that Craig is suggesting experience, then, is a valuable asset to have in your editor.

- 3.** First and foremost, it's about the quality of the writing. That seems to go without saying but I've repeated it for its very importance in this discussion.
- 4.** Most authors need to do research for their subject, whether for historical details or the way to do an oil change. Writers must be careful not to wax eloquently on that research at the expense of the story. Be careful not to let your research show. I found out great detail on how to skin a raccoon and my first draft had it all, but subsequent cutting meant most of that scene was gone. It really didn't add anything to John's going off to war.
- 5.** Great books break rules in a positive manner and that makes them fresh and different.

For the final hours of the workshop we worked on pitch lines. The term 'elevator pitch' has more to do with the time it takes to tell someone about your book—and hook them!—than about being on an actual elevator. Here is the pitch I came up with for *The Loyalist's Wife*: “A young Loyalist couple in 1778 New York State meets the challenges of their lives as he goes off to fight for the King and she remains alone on their isolated farm to fight her own war.”

About Elaine Cougler

Born and raised in the heart of Southwestern Ontario's dairy country, Elaine is a graduate of the University of Western Ontario and a former high school teacher. She taught French, English and Computer Studies at various high schools across the province. Writing is Elaine's pleasure and her obsession. She has written two books of family memories, a cookbook, a children's book, and *The Loyalist's Wife*, her historical novel, which she hopes to publish next year. Currently she is working on the sequel. **On Becoming a Wordsmith** is Elaine's writing blog where she blogs about the journey to publication and beyond.

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