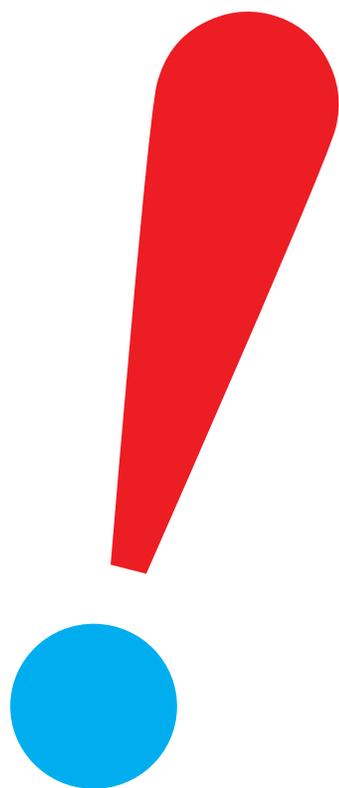


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INTRODUCTION

See if you can spot the cliché.

He's struggling at his desk, sucking down a cigarette, scratching his whiskers, and suffering the tyranny of another blank page. Too easy? It's the archetype of a struggling writer.

Whether it's a typewriter or a laptop, cigarettes or a smoothie, 'he' or 'she,' the struggle remains the same. At some point most writers will face this struggle, the

furious and paralyzing reality of squeezing perfect ideas into imperfect words.

We at Signature feel your pain, so we've compiled a helpful guide filled with writing advice from respected authors to hopefully steer you through the storms of any given writing project. Read on for all the basics to get started.

The Beginning

WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A WRITER

by ELIZABETH BERG

It helps if you're a crybaby, which is to say it helps if you feel things very deeply and respond to them, whether with actual tears or not. (If he's not already, John Boehner should be a writer.)

Along with a great deal of sensitivity, you need to develop and practice the habit of noticing: a flicker of a facial muscle that suggests anger; the tone beneath words being spoken; the movement of wind in the linden trees; the bagging at the knees of a pair of pants; what your grandmother's apron smelled like when she pulled you in for a hug; how, when you bite your cheek, the blood tastes in your mouth. You need to study your species and your habitat, and then you need to be like my daughter, Julie, when she was three years old and saw tannish sand from the snow plows covering the white. "The snow looks just like crumb cake," she said, and she was absolutely right. You need to notice all the time, and then tell what you saw in a new way. As for the notion that everything has already been

said, maybe it has, but life is like meatloaf: there are so many different ways to present it. What's unique about you is what makes your writing interesting, and what makes it shine. It is yet another reason why you should never try to imitate other writers.

You need to be a panhandler: you need to collect all you notice and then sift through it for the gold; you need to be discerning. You need a sense of restraint, a sense of timing. You need to know when to hold back and when to put those nuggets in; your writing should be like a river, flowing, changing, bringing the reader along on an unpredictable ride.

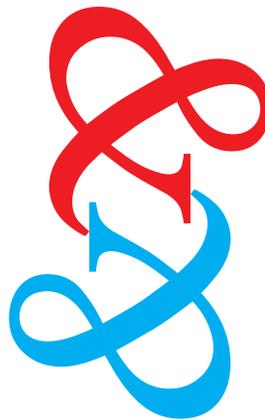
No matter what you write, you need an active imagination. You need to be entertaining story ideas all the time: lying in bed, at the grocery store, out for a walk, even (sad to say) when you're in conversation with someone. Writers have a reputation for being distracted. That's because writers are distracted. They are always tuned into that other

voice, the one in their head that rarely turns off. Even in sleep, its little light glows.

You need a place to work that works for you; and you need people to understand that when you are writing, you are doing a rarefied type of brain surgery and therefore should not be subject to a million random interruptions. You need supplies you like: I favor folders with girly designs, a certain brand of orange pencil with black wood called Rhodia (available from the funky Pieritz Brothers Of-

ice Supplies, Oak Park, Ill.). I like black, 3-inch, 3-ring notebooks with pockets for holding notes. And my favorite coffee cup by my side. And fresh flowers. And my dog. And a Barr-Co. "Original Scent" candle, burning.

If you are interested in publishing, you'll need to develop a thick skin because you'll get rejected. Then, when you are published, no matter how many good reviews you get, you'll get some stinkers, even some scorchers. People won't always get you. Or they'll get you wrong. Or



they'll get you right and praise you to the skies to boot, but if you're a real writer, you'll be too neurotic to take that in; you'll be feeling for the pea in the mattress. And of course, all this business about developing a thick skin is just useless prattle: you don't have a thick skin because you're so sensitive, so you'll have to suffer. But this is a good excuse for a martini with another suffering writer.

You need to admit joy. Let the need and practice of writing be joyful, first and foremost. Everything else falls away -- or should -- when you're experiencing the profound satisfaction of releasing what's gnawing away at the inside, seeking a way to make you understand something you can't understand any other way.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, you need to remember that your own review of your work is the one that matters most.

If you'll excuse me now, I think I'll go and try to follow my own advice.

ELIZABETH BERG won the NEBA Award for fiction for her body of work, and was a finalist for the ABBY for *Talk Before Steep*. Her writing has appeared in numerous publications, including *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Redbook*, and the *New York Times Magazine*. She has also taught a writing workshop at Radcliffe College. She lives near Boston, Massachusetts.

4 TRICKS ON SELF-STARTING

by **UNA LAMARCHE**

Confession: For the past ten minutes I've been

scrolling through Facebook looking at photos of distant acquaintances' vacation feet and sleeping cats because I'm avoiding starting this piece. And also because, if I'm being honest, my go-to exercise for warming up to write is rampant, shameless procrastination. (It is a fact that I once stopped scrolling through Facebook to open another Facebook window in a new tab, so desperate was my desire to do anything but start my book.)

I am incredibly anal* so no matter what I'm writing, I have a compulsion to write in order. That means that before I start, I create an outline of the entire thing (or, as with my forthcoming essay collection, *Unabrow*, an insane Carrie Matheson-style wall of Post-Its) so that I know, at least roughly, where I'm going. This is important because, inevitably, at some point in the process, I will seriously consider setting my computer on fire. But my outline will give me pause, assuring me that

once, at least for a fleeting moment, I seemed to know what I was doing.

I love first sentences because they are full of promise. I like to think of them as an introductory handshake made of words, one that can't be too limp, too strong, too eager or sweaty. Ideally, I think, a first paragraph should feel like shaking Taye Diggs's hand right after he's used one of those warm towels they sometimes hand out at Japanese restaurants.

Unfortunately, I have no easy formula for getting that down on paper. I don't rise before the dawn every morning and eat quinoa and then stand patiently in tree pose until the Muse strikes. Usually it's mid-afternoon and my son is at school and I'm sipping six-hour-old room-temperature coffee just trying to remember how to spell. But I do have a few tips for tricking yourself into being at least semi-inspired:

1. Try saying ideas or lines out loud to yourself. You can jump right in to your first scene, test out some dialogue, or even dictate the plot in a more general way. And if you do this while taking a walk -- which I find

often jump-starts my creativity – make sure to pretend you’re talking to someone on the phone so the UPS guys won’t give you side-eye.

2. Just type something. Then delete it, because it’s terrible. Type something else. Rearrange the words.

Add festive punctuation.

Then delete that, and start again. Eventually, something will start to seem right. (It’s like Michelangelo chipping away at a block of marble, only instead of marble you have a computer screen and instead of a chisel you have a stress headache.

On the plus side, you, at least, have a flush toilet.)

3. Make a “Word Bag.” Write some fun nouns or feelings – Shame! Donut! Virginity! Class trip! – down on scraps of paper and stick ‘em in a vessel of your choosing. Then fish one out, set a timer, and free-write something inspired by that word. (You can then immediately delete it as outlined in tip #2.)

4. Transcribe some dialogue between two characters. It can be about

anything; nonsensical or mundane. Just keep writing until it takes an interesting turn, or someone breaks the fourth wall and suggests you order in nachos.

Sometimes I get really blocked and can’t come up with anything for

weeks. During

those periods

I tend to avoid opening my

laptop unless I get an alert that

there’s a new episode of “The

Real Housewives” ready

for download on my iTunes

season pass. It can be tortur-

ous to force yourself to stare

at a blank document during a

block. Yes, sit-

ting down and putting in the time

is important, but I think it’s okay to

take a day or even a week off if facing Microsoft Word ends up feeling

like being yelled at by the guy from “Full Metal Jacket.”

Writing advice can take that tone

sometimes. I mean, almost all famous writers will tell you that you

HAVE to write, EVERY DAY, to WORK ON YOUR CRAFT, or else you are NOT A REAL WRITER. But riddle me this, Jonathan Safran-

Foer: Does a brain surgeon operate on brains every day? Does a rocket scientist science rockets every day? Does a plumber plumb every day? And is he not still a plumber, nay, the best plumber of his generation? Okay, fine, maybe not the best, but he’s still a plumber.

Which is my point. So hang in there.

*Note: not my lead sentence, because referencing a rectum right off the bat is a bold move best left to the Franzens and Tartts of the world.

UNA LAMARCHE is the author of two young adult novels, *Five Summers* and *Like No Other*, and *Unabrow: Misadventures of a Late Bloomer*, a collection of humor essays based on some of her more questionable life choices. She is also a contributing writer for *The New York Observer* and *The Huffington Post*, and blogs at *The Sassy Curmudgeon*. Una lives in Brooklyn with her husband and son.

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WRITE A SHITTY DRAFT

by L.Y. MARLOW

As a little girl, I knew I had a gift the day I wrote my first poem

– *Money Can't Buy Love* – when a little brown boy named Darryl, my first love, broke my heart when he flat out refused to share my lunch. I ... was ... devastated! But what I didn't know then, that I truly understand now, is that Darryl's rejection unleashed something inside me that I'd learned to express with words.

Words did not come as easily to me when I decided to step down from a lucrative and vibrant corporate career and pursue my passion to write. Soon, I hired a writing coach and, when she read the first few pages of my manuscript, she was just as brutal as Darryl.

"Put the pen down!" she lashed.

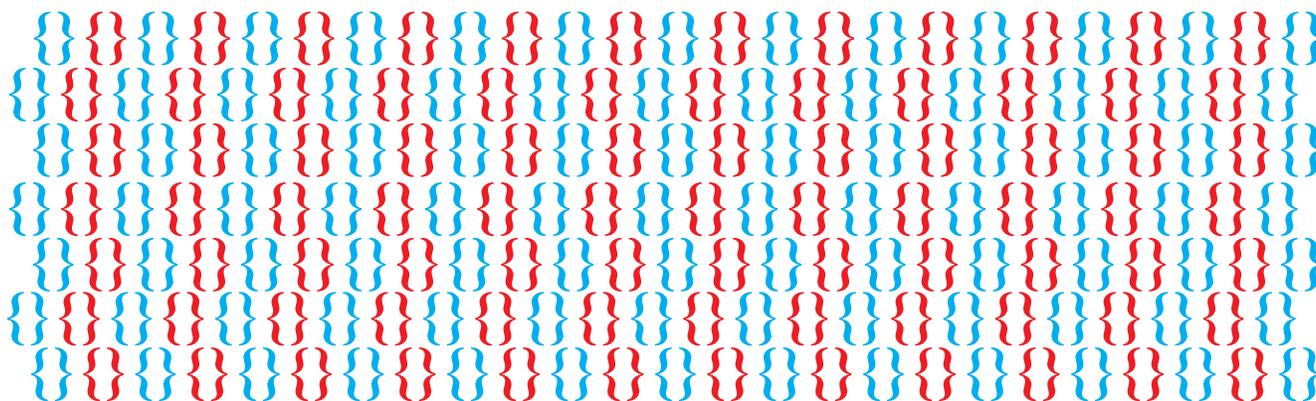
Then she recommended I read several books; one of which was *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* by Janet Burroway. It would be these few words in this book that stuck with me: "Write a shitty draft."

That advice not only toughened my creative backbone but gave me permission to let go. I mean really let go and write – freely. I didn't think about an outline. I didn't concern myself with the words on the page. I didn't care what I said. I just wrote ... and wrote ... and wrote ... to the tune of 432 pages that emerged into my first book, *Color Me Butterfly*, which ultimately landed multiple awards and paved the way for my second book, *A Life Apart*.

Now, don't get me wrong. I still

encounter the occasional writer's block, heart palpitations, and sometimes I want to throw that damn laptop across the room. But, whenever I get consumed by my own negative self-talk or fear, I just simply take a deep breath, grow balls, and write a shitty draft.

L.Y. MARLOW is the author of *A Life Apart* and the award-winning *Color Me Butterfly*—the story that inspired her to found Saving Promise, a national domestic violence prevention organization inspired by five generations of mothers and daughters in her family that survived more than 60 years of domestic violence, and her granddaughter, a little girl named Promise.



OPENING A STORY THE RIGHT WAY

by CHARLES BAXTER

Picture this: it's a dentist's office, and a young guy comes in for an appointment and sits down in the dentist's chair. The dentist says, "So. What can I do for you?" and the guy says, "I want you to pull all my teeth out." The dentist looks at the teeth and says, "I can't do that. It wouldn't be ethical. Your teeth are all fine." The guy replies, "So is my money. Rip 'em all out." That's from John Collier's "Another American Tragedy," a story I admire, from 1951.

Anytime I start working on a story, I want to create a condition with an element of mystery in it. I set up a question that I and my readers want to have answered. For example: "Jerry, the best player on our football team, came into the locker room thirty minutes before the homecoming game and told us he was quitting." OK: why did Jerry quit, and what's going to happen to the team? The story begins in one place and then goes somewhere else in the main part of the plot. I don't always

know where. Richard Hugo said that the opening of a story or poem uses what he calls "the initiating or triggering subject," which starts the story and causes the story to be written, and the real or generated subject is what the story eventually gets to. Maybe you start a story about Jerry, a football player who's decided to quit, but the real story is about, let's say, his girlfriend. Or his mother. Or his father's drug addiction.

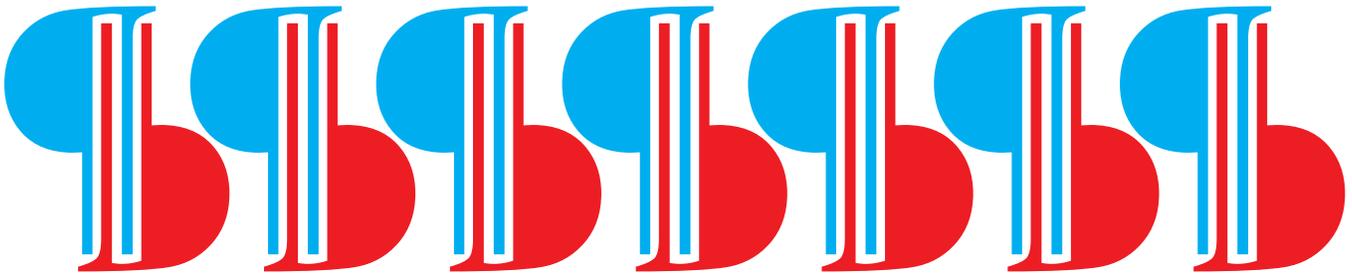
A story can begin with a setting (a place) that has something mysterious about it and provokes a question in the reader, or it can begin with a character who has something mysterious or unknown about him or her, or it can begin with a situation that seems slightly odd or mysterious or potentially dangerous. Saul Bellow started one of his stories with: "Yes, I knew the guy." Obviously these categories can overlap.

Suppose you have a house, a place we can all visualize. How do you create a small mystery? You say something like this: "The house at the end of the block had all its window shades pulled down day and night, and no one ever saw anyone

go in or come out of the front or the back door."

When the trigger is a person, it helps to have a telling detail. "When my grandmother came into the room, carrying her cat, everyone stopped talking." That combines an action and a person. Flannery O'Connor said that fiction is incarnational, meaning: specific -- full of details. Maybe the triggering character is a customer. "A woman came down the produce aisle where I was working and deliberately pushed her cart into the display of apples."

You don't have to set a Chevrolet on fire or have someone murdered on the first page to get the reader's attention. We've all watched a lifetime's worth of TV and movies that put big and often violent events into the first five minutes as a hook to get our attention. The assumption is that we have the attention span of chimpanzees. But hooks are hard to live up to; you can't stay at that level. Besides, screen culture does violence better than written culture—leave the big violence to the movies. Better to start with a small mystery and build up to a bigger one. The



truth about a situation is always big enough to sustain someone's attention.

Stories often start with a situation that is larger than the characters or the setting. Think of a toxic spill: "At five minutes after four o'clock, the warning siren went off near the Chemistry building." That opening sentence doesn't give us any characters, really. It just suggests what the new situation is, a situation that has some hazards or possibilities built into it. Or think of a loud party, for example: "Down below my apartment, at street level, a bunch of people were yelling and throwing beer bottles at passing cars." A triggering situation has in it some prospect for interesting trouble, and is marked by the possibility that someone might get hurt, or lose something, or gain something. Where do we put the interesting trouble? Anywhere. "With a spare one dollar bill, Jerry bought a lottery ticket at the drugstore and shoved it into his back pocket."

The old ballads used to begin with situations, and the bluegrass ballads in the Blue Ridge Mountains still start that way. They're often quite violent. There's a traditional one called "Silver Dagger":

*Don't sing love songs, you'll wake
my mother.*

She's sleeping here right by my side.

And in her right hand, a silver dagger.

She says that I can't be your bride.

This has everything. We have the primary characters: three people: the speaker, a young woman; her mother, her protector and jailer; and the young man outside her window who wants to sing to her and to be her lover. We have a situation with conflict in it: the man wants to sing a love song to the girl, but the mother, who may be crazy, will stab either her daughter or the boy or both of them if they try anything. And of course we wonder what's going to

happen next.

If a story is going to be any good, it has to tell the truth about a situation and not just amaze or shock us. The trigger has to take us to a core of meaningful action that's worth our time. A story turns on a light; beauty and truth are its illuminated products.

CHARLES BAXTER is the author of the novels *The Feast of Love* (nominated for the National Book Award), *The Soul Thief*, *Saul and Patsy*, *Shadow Play*, and *First Light*, and the story collections *Gryphon*, *Believers*, *A Relative Stranger*, *Through the Safety Net*, and *Harmony of the World*. The stories "Bravery" and "Charity," which appear in *There's Something I Want You to Do*, were included in *Best American Short Stories*. Baxter lives in Minneapolis and teaches at the University of Minnesota and in the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College.

[INSERT STRONG TITLE HERE]

by DAVID LEVITHAN

I would like to talk for a moment about titles. Because they are, you know, helpful.

Not just for librarians and people who like to alphabetize their shelves by title instead of, say, color. Not just for the book addict trawling the displays to find his or her next fix. No – titles are useful for writers. Why? Because they remind us what we're writing.

I know this is obvious. Or basic. Or reductive. But maybe also helpful.

Here is a typical exchange I can have with another author. Or myself, when I am treating myself like I'm another author.

Other author: I don't know what my book's about.

Me: What's the title?

Other author says the title.

Me: That's what the book's about.

(If you don't like to commit to a title upfront, then the question becomes: What's the name of the document?)

To wit: When I was writing *Every Day*, the document was named everyday, while my title was A. If I lost my way, I could always look to these two tipoffs to remember what was actually important to me about the story I was telling -- the character of A, and the fact that A changed bodies and lives every day. Or *Two Boys Kissing*. Everything I was trying to accomplish was right there: the outness and upfrontness of the story; the fact that it was something I wouldn't have been able to get away with a decade ago, in the same way the characters couldn't have gotten away with their actions a decade ago. *Boy Meets Boy*: if I ever lost track of my story's heart, it was right there for me. I wanted to write a simple, romantic story, which would be (for YA) radical in its simplicity and its romanticism.

The title you give a story -- whether it ends up being your final title, or whether it's just a placeholder -- is your North Star. If you have a placeholder that doesn't feel right, you have to ask yourself why it doesn't feel right, and that, too, can guide you to where you need to be, because it shows you where you shouldn't go.

So trust your title. If you're stuck, go back to it. Ask yourself why it's important. And by following what's important to you, you may just end up with something that will be important to other people. They will see that title and it will make that subterranean connection. What draws you to the novel is inevitably what draws the reader in. Most of the time we don't get to choose our own names, but we always choose the names of our stories for a reason.

DAVID LEVITHAN is a children's book editor in New York City. He is the author of *Boy Meets Boy* and *Every Day*, among others, and *Hold Me Closer*.

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The Block

TURNING FEAR INTO EXCITEMENT

by EMMA CAMPION

On the occasion of my first private interview with a Buddhist teacher,

I talked about the fear that froze me when I sat down to work on a novel I'd been gearing up to write for years. This wise, patient teacher smiled at me and said, in a soft voice with just a hint of laughter in it, "Oh, I know that energy. Try this: Ask yourself whether you're sure it's fear and not excitement. It's almost impossible to tell the difference. So why not go with excitement?"

Turn it around. I tried it, and it worked. Such a wise woman!

During a recent heady surge of creativity my old friend fear came up

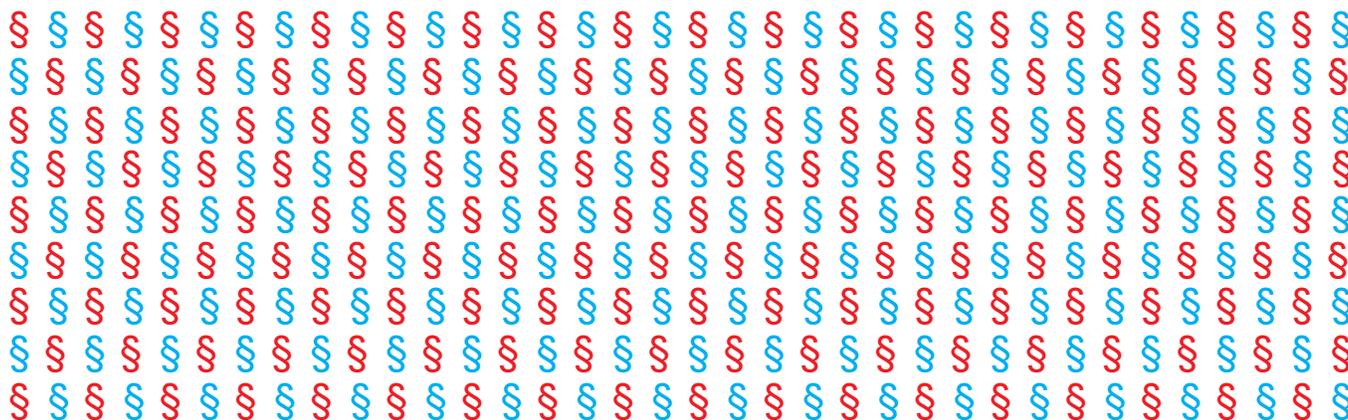
with a new story: This won't last. My old friend fear didn't even need to embellish the story – I did. I decided that it not only wouldn't last, but it was a delusion. I'd been writing garbage. I started ripping everything apart; what had been brilliant yesterday was plodding and obvious today. Fortunately my first reader had just read the opening of my work-in-progress and declared it thrilling. Hmm Who was I going to believe: fear or my trustworthy first reader? I took a deep breath and sat with the feeling beneath the story. I noticed that the energy was the same; I had simply switched from using it to create to using it to destroy.

So I turned it back around: All this fear and doubt was simply a surge of energy that needed release, and it was my choice whether I used it to

destroy or create. I played with this and noticed that when I used it to destroy, the energy didn't release but grew in intensity; but when I used it to tell a story I could feel the relaxation as the pressure eased.

How about that? All the edgy feelings want is for me to surrender to the story. All I need to do is get out of my own way.

EMMA CAMPION is the author of *The King's Mistress* and did her graduate work in medieval and Anglo-Saxon literature. "Emma Campion" is the pen name for Candace Robb, who is the author of ten Owen Archer mysteries as well as the Margaret Kerr Trilogy. She lives in Seattle and you can learn more about her at emmacampion.com.



INSPIRATION IS FOR AMATEURS

by TAYLOR STEVENS

I'm often asked how to find inspiration and how to overcome writer's block.

These questions have always baffled me. Not because I'm some inspired production machine effortlessly cranking out action and prose, but because the very notion that inspiration should somehow be required to write engaging fiction, or that it's possible for words and ideas to flow without struggle, is quite beyond my own reality.

I know these things do exist for some authors. I know it in the same way I know that people who can pull jet planes with their teeth exist.

I claim to not experience writer's block, but that's an end product built out of much rawer material. The truer truth is that writer's block is my perpetual creative state, and because I've never known anything other than difficulty in producing stories, I've never had any other choice but to overcome that difficulty. Every. Single. Day.

Which is why my very baffled answer to these questions has always been, "You write. What else would you do?"

In response, I'm usually met with the same blank, confused-but-trying-to-get-it expressions you'd expect to see on the faces of pilgrims who've just received an abstruse blessing from their guru. And so I explain further:

If you've never experienced this thing called "inspiration," you learn not to wait for it. And in not waiting, you learn that this so-called "inspiration" comes from doing. As does clarity, as does story, and plot, and characters, and those very rare flashes of brilliance. All of this comes together through the action of doing: of sitting down, staring at the blank page, and hammering out one crappy word after the other – even when you've got nothing, even when you don't feel like it, even when you're pretty sure the time would be better

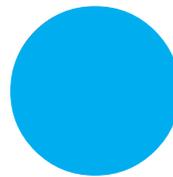
served by getting up and pouring a bowl of Cheetos.

Sometimes the words you put down aren't even coherent. Sometimes the thoughts are jumbled. And certainly none of them read very well. But none of that matters. What matters is that you sit there and write, and you write, and you keep writing.

When one crappy sentence leads to a crappy paragraph, and a crappy paragraph leads to a crappy page,

you now have the beginning of something. And in that something the ideas crystalize, and the flaws materialize, and you can take that something and delete what's wrong and save what's right. And the next day you do it again. After enough crappy pages, you begin to have a crappy story. And once you have a crappy story, you have something to chew on. Then, bit by bit, you see the ways in

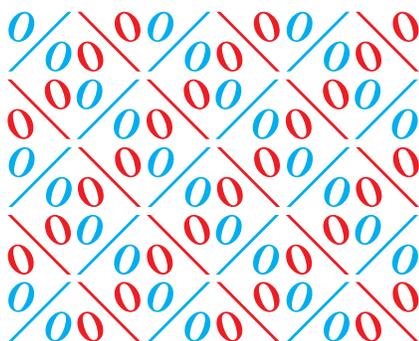
which you can make the crappy less crappy, and you go back to work on it, and then you do it again the next



day. When enough of those days blur together, you begin to realize that the crap is even less crappy. So you keep at it until the crap gets buried beneath everything else that works.

The artist Chuck Close is credited with saying, “Inspiration is for amateurs – the rest of us just show up and get to work.” He also claimed to have never experienced painter’s block. I tend to think that he and I are pretty much on the same page in this regard.

TAYLOR STEVENS is the award-winning, *New York Times* bestselling author of the critically acclaimed Vanessa Michael Munroe series. Stevens came to writing fiction late. Born into an apocalyptic cult, denied an education beyond sixth grade, and raised in communes across the globe, she now calls Dallas home. In addition to novels, Stevens shares extensively about the mechanics of storytelling, writing, overcoming adversity, and the details of her journey into publishing at taylorstevensbooks.com. She welcomes you to join her.



THE TYRANNY OF THE BLANK PAGE

by **ANDY WEIR**

In your mind, your novel is an epic tale that will redefine a genre.

Fans will cosplay your characters. The internet will argue about which plot twist was the most awesome. George R. R. Martin will come knocking on your door for narrative advice. It’s that good. But when you try to actually write the damn thing, you freeze up.

How can this be? You have the setting defined in excruciating detail. You could fill an encyclopedia with information about the protagonist’s childhood. You have the next six books in the series all planned out. Why can’t you squeeze out a single sentence?

You’re not alone. Every author faces this. The transition from ideal to reality is a rocky one. Every story is unique, so there’s no magic answer. But there are a few tips that might help you to defeat the tyranny of the

blank page.

1) The purpose of the first line is to capture the reader.

You have one sentence to convince the reader to finish the first paragraph. You have that paragraph to make them read the first page. If they turn the page, you’ve got them for a chapter.

So make that first line interesting. It doesn’t have to be a major plot point. It just has to make them want to read the next line. The easiest way to do that is to tease the reader with a small mystery.

“It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen” (*1984*, by George Orwell). An opening like that raises questions. Readers are inquisitive souls. If you make them wonder about something, they’ll read on to find the answer. Hook them with their own curiosity.

2) Don’t start with exposition.

Nothing makes readers close a book faster than a long opening paragraph describing a mountain range.

Reading exposition is like doing homework or paying taxes. The reader accepts that they will have to learn this stuff at some point, but it's usually not rewarding for them, in and of itself. It's an investment made with the understanding that it's critical to the story -- one that readers are only willing to make after you've got them invested in the story itself.

The Hobbit takes place in one of the most nuanced, well-defined settings ever created. Tolkien invented legends, languages, songs, and thousands of years of history. But instead of trying to ram all that down the reader's throat, the book begins with: "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit."

3) Feel free to start in the middle.

If you don't know where to start, don't bother deciding right now.

The first line of a book is critical, but there's no rule that says you have to start there. The first words you write

might end up being the middle of chapter three. That's perfectly fine.

And as you work forward in the story, you'll get an idea about how to work backward. Once your characters develop and the plot grows in directions you didn't expect, you may see the perfect scene to start things off with.

4) Bungle your way through.

It's easy to get stuck worrying about the nuances of the first scene. Instead, try writing as if you were telling the story to a friend. It's okay if it sucks. You can edit it later. You may even find a better spot to start the story. The trick is to get things flowing.

Give it a try. Open your word processor right now and write one sentence, just one, that describes an action taken by the main character.

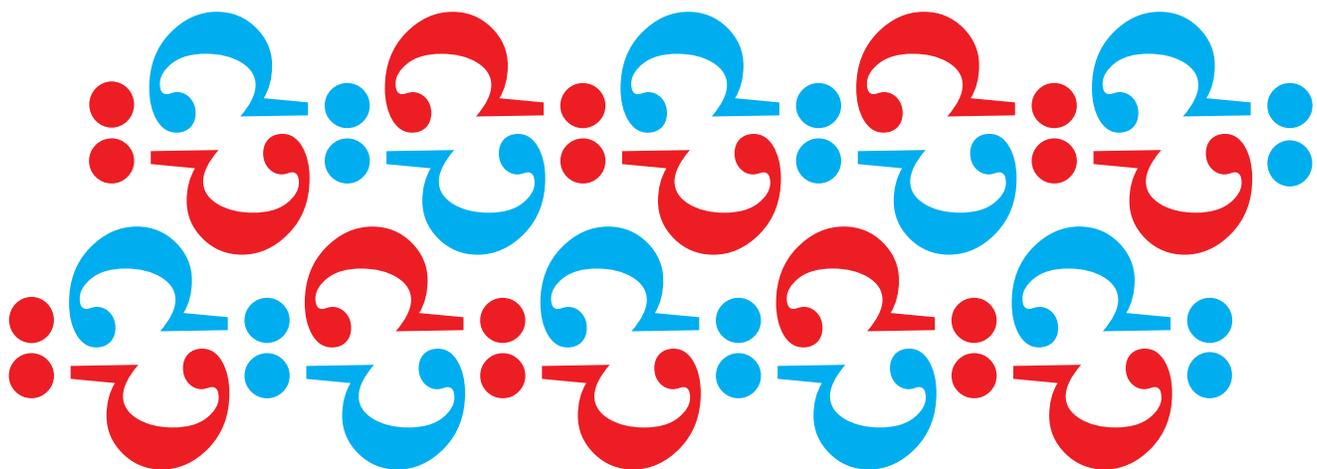
Even if it's "John drank his coffee," you've gotten your start. Move on from there, make no effort to be any good, and narrate as if you were

talking to a friend: "John drank his coffee. He didn't know Ruth had poisoned it because she wanted him dead so she could run off with his business partner. Ruth's his wife. See, the reason she did that was because she thought John had cheated on her, but actually he was investigating an insurance fraud ..."

Clumsy, awkward, and terrible to read. But after a few sentences, your first line becomes clear: "John drank his poisoned coffee."

Your reader now wants to know more.

ANDY WEIR was first hired as a programmer for a national laboratory at age fifteen and has been working as a software engineer ever since. He is also a lifelong space nerd and a devoted hobbyist of subjects like relativistic physics, orbital mechanics, and the history of manned spaceflight. *The Martian*, adapted for film by Ridley Scott, is his first novel.



The Breakthrough

ON LITTLE MOMENTS OF UNLOCKING

by MAGGIE SHIPSTEAD

The fact that I just spent ten minutes with my forehead on my desk

trying to start writing something about how I start writing says a lot about how poorly I understand my own process. In some ways, I have a better sense of how I start short stories than novels, partly because I've written many more of them. Plus, both my novels started as stories I couldn't make work, awkward drafts I'd written just so I'd have something to turn in to workshop. I didn't outline either book. When I started to expand them, I had several waypoints out in the distance that I wrote toward, but, for the most part, plot and characters emerged as I went.

Usually my stories come from the intersection of at least two ideas. At any given time I have a handful of vague notions floating around about settings I'd like to use or characters or inciting incidents. One element isn't enough to go on, and so I wait until I see a way to combine one or two (or more) of those ingredients with a concept for structure or voice.

For example, when writing my story "La Moretta," I started out toying with an anecdote my cousin had told me about a honeymoon gone horribly wrong and also with the setting of Romania in the 1970s, where my parents actually honeymooned in 1971. I wrote some pages, but I felt they lacked life and momentum. Then, as I was falling asleep one night, it came to me that I should start the story with a conversation between two disembodied voices, a kind of mysterious interrogation that periodically interrupts the more straightforward third-person action, and everything fell into place.

That moment right before sleep has been fruitful for me. My short story "The Great Central Pacific Guano Company" is written in the first person plural thanks to another late night revelation, and there's a slightly unhinged movie star narrator in my story "You Have A Friend in 10A" whose voice came to me after lights out and provided the necessary glue for bringing together an idea about a dead soldier being transported home on a commercial flight and a wildly unrelated idea about an L.A. cult. I've learned, though, that I have to rouse myself enough to make a note

on my phone or on paper, otherwise my breakthroughs tend to have vanished by morning.

These little moments of unlocking, of finding the key to the puzzle, often manifest as first sentences. The first sentence establishes so much as far as tone, verb tense, point of view, even rhythm. Ethan Canin, one of my teachers in grad school, said that the whole story should be in the first sentence, and I think that's true, although for me it's more that the whole story unravels from the first sentence. The first sentence is what I return to when I need to be reoriented while writing.

In my novels, the first paragraphs were the first pieces to be written. Winn Van Meter, the protagonist of *Seating Arrangements*, wakes up and starts his very orderly day, the beginning of a weekend where his need for control and for things to be just so will be thwarted again and again. The first paragraph is fairly neutral, meant to convey a sense of Winn and also to suggest the tight focus and chronological format of the book, which takes place primarily over two days.

Astonish Me opens with two black

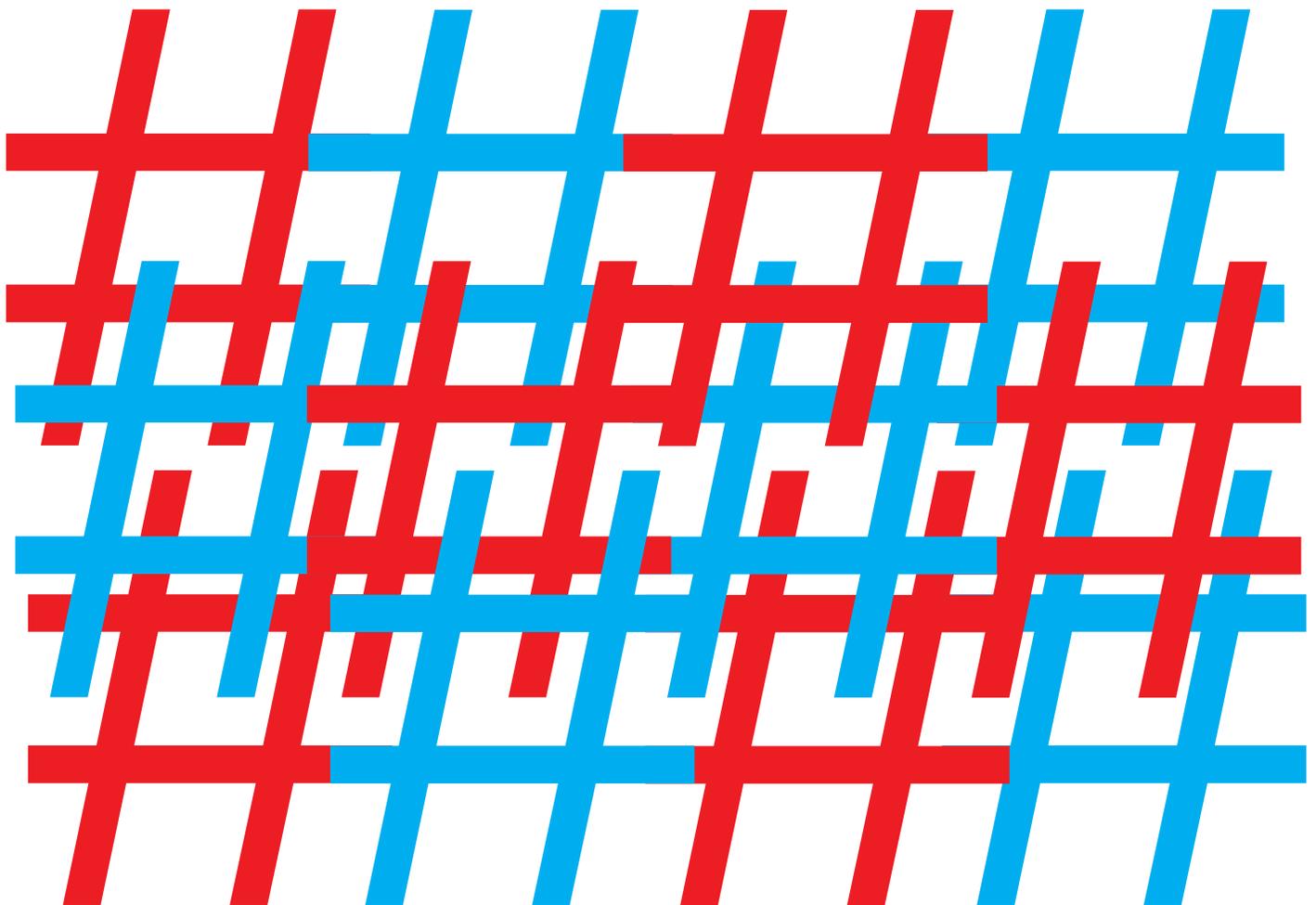
dachshunds in a basket in the wings of a theater as a ballet performance is happening. In a documentary I'd watched about the Paris Opera Ballet, there was a moment where a principal dancer was warming up at the barre while her two little wiener dogs milled around her feet, staring up at her, seemingly in constant danger of getting kicked. I'd been both amused and haunted by the image -- the mingled devotion and apparent obliviousness, the way, for a dancer, absolutely everything is secondary to ballet. *Astonish Me* is a backstage

book and also one that is meant to suggest the breathlessness and heightened emotions of ballet, so beginning in the wings, where dancers are sheltered enough to show their exhaustion and effort, made sense. Also, since the novel's point of view roves among the characters, I didn't want to focus the reader's attention firmly on one perspective right away but instead to suggest a looser, broader point of view.

Beginnings are a mystery, but to me they're the most exciting part of

writing, when potential seems limitless and all those terrible, thorny problems that will pop up down the line can't even be imagined.

MAGGIE SHIPSTEAD is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and a former Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. Her first novel, *Seating Arrangements*, was a *New York Times* best seller.



HOW WRITING IS LIKE TRAVELING

by JOHN MARSHALL

Writing has always felt like traveling to me.

The start of every project is another adventure, a chance to set out into the unknown and see where the journey takes me. I never quite know exactly where I'm going at first, but my itinerary is always the same. The blank page is the landscape that must be crossed, and, as every writer knows, it can be as formidable as the bleakest terrain on Earth.

The trick for me is just to start. When I was younger, I used to struggle with beginnings, stalling for hours like a hiker agonizing over where to place his first step. Now, I just walk. I don't worry about the destination, The End. As a mentor of mine once advised: "You can drive all the way across the country in the pitch dark, so long as your headlights shine on the road right in front of you. And you start driving."

For me, it's all about forward motion. I don't use a computer. Typing feels sterile, too still, too slow. I can write much faster by hand, leaving an all-but-illegible scrawl behind my pen. I like to cross out. To circle sections and move them with quick arrows to

another part of the page. Anything to create movement, to get moving. I don't worry about perfect sentences. I write bad ones, fragments, half-baked thoughts. I'll take my time in the re-write. First drafts are a sprint. If I get blocked, I work around it, as every traveler knows.

I remember hiking through the dense bush of New Zealand with my wife and two teenage kids, navigating a hillside trail that had a wall of moss on one side and a steep drop on the other. We were on the Heaphy Track, a fifty-mile walk through the Northwest corner of the South Island; it's mostly untouched gorgeousness that took us four days to complete.

But somewhere in the middle, around one corner, we suddenly stopped. A violent storm the night before had ripped a huge tree from the bank, knocking it in our path, and completely obscuring the trail with a ten-foot wall of debris. There was no going around it. We were stuck.

Still, it did not occur to any of us to stop, the way writers stop. We simply started to climb, tried this, tried that, squeezed and inched our way through the tangle of roots and broken branches, until we cleared the obstacle and the trail opened up for us once

again.

I'm not trying to imply that I never feel blocked or uninspired or eager to do anything other than write when I sit down at my desk. As someone who loves language, who savors and re-savors sentences for their sheer beauty, I also agonize over word choices, cadence, transitions, structure, all of that.

But not at the beginning.

A journey of a thousand miles, like a book of a thousand pages, begins with a single step. A single word. So I write it. And write another one. And cross that one off. And keep going. Like the best adventures I've ever been on, I explore, play, don't judge, move forward, struggle, find a way. Writing, like traveling, is an action word, after all.

JOHN MARSHALL is a nine-time Emmy Award-winning writer, producer, and director. In addition to his work behind the camera, Marshall has been a familiar face on Maine television for more than ten years, writing and hosting numerous weekly TV shows. His first book is entitled *Wide-Open World: How Volunteering Around the Globe Changed One Family's Lives Forever*.

THE NATURAL STATE OF 'OUTSIDERLINESS'

by JO BAKER

Writing starts with some thing lurking at the back of my head.

It seems inert, unresolvable, like a worry. It can linger there for years. And then other elements drip in -- maybe new ideas, maybe long held notions that have gained new associations -- and then things begin to fizz.

Even though *Offcomer* was written more than fifteen years ago, I can still recall that lurking feeling, the worry. I was living in Belfast, as a student, and I was beginning to write -- short stories, poems -- but anything bigger was elusive. Belfast was my lived, day-to-day experience; I loved the city, and it was shaping me as a person and a writer, but what could I, a newcomer, an English girl, possibly have to say about the place? I didn't belong there. My voice seemed invalid, intrusive, certainly irrelevant.

And then I heard Salman Rushdie talk about his writing. The gist of it was that outsiderliness, not belonging, could be enabling to

a writer. It was, in fact, a natural state for writing to happen in.

And then a word that had been tucked away in some forgotten drawer at the back of my brain popped back up into my consciousness. The word had been used to describe newcomers -- including me and my family -- in the village I grew up in in north Lancashire. "Offcomer." It's a dialect term -- before the advent of the railways a stagecoach route used to run across the sands of the estuary here -- readers of *Longbourn* might recognize the image. The word dates from then: if you were new, you must have come off the sands -- you were an Offcomer.

That was when things began to fizz. Three elements: the city I loved but where I would never quite belong; that it was okay to be an outsider and to write (Salman Rushdie had said so, after all); and that one odd word, Offcomer, that felt peculiarly my own.

And out of that came a first image, a lost girl, trying to find a way to belong, to be at home in a damaged place, and in her own damaged skin.

It's been the same with each novel, from *Offcomer* to the book that I'm at work on now. The content changes, but the pattern always remains the same. What I don't know, and seem to have very little control over, is when or even if it's going to happen again, and what it's going to be about next time.

JO BAKER was born in Lancashire and educated at Oxford University and Queen's University Belfast. She is the author of *Longbourn* and *Offcomer*, among others.

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7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE WRITERS

by ALEXIS LANDAU

The ‘Writing Mindset.’

There is no “writing mindset” -- if I waited for that, I would never write. The only thing that helps is sitting down every day, at the same time (roughly) and having peace and quiet, even if it is just an hour, to think, without the pressures of the outside world. I don’t check email or take any phone calls. It is a reserved time, just to ponder and explore various ideas, scenes and characters. Mary Oliver once said something about how if you show up for the muse consistently, then she will start showing up for you consistently, as if the psyche knows that you are writing and preparing, and so after time, you get something back, but you have to be there to receive it, no matter how painfully slow or awful you think it’s going. I also try to remember not to dismiss any idea, no matter how arbitrary it may seem in the moment, because sometimes the small detail, or phrase later generates a great scene or moment in the story which was unexpected,

whereas oftentimes you think writing a certain scene is going to be so monumental and important, and you start to write it, and it falls flat because you’ve built it up so much in your mind. I always try to remind myself that what makes something interesting are the small human details and moments, not the grand sweeping gestures.

Writing Quirks.

In terms of quirky traits when writing, I would say coffee is paramount -- double shot cappuccinos -- and maybe not running out of snacks. It is really hard to write if you get too hungry, but a little sting of hunger can actually help -- that desperation, felt on a physical level, can inspire me even more to keep going, with of course the knowledge that at some point, I’ll get to eat. My favorite place to write is in the conference room of my father’s office -- I know it sounds strange, but it is always dark, quiet and infused with the fact that “real work” is being done all around me so I better get to work too. Where I can’t stand to work is in a café. I’ve tried to do this many times, but I always overhear conversations about vari-

ous yoga practices, insane diets, and sweat lodges -- I live in LA, so that’s what one hears. Sometimes I can work at home, but I have two young children so if they are awake, that proves impossible.

Writer’s Block.

So far, I have not really had real writer’s block -- but if I do feel temporarily blocked or hesitant or unable to write something, I stop and think about why -- what is it about the material or the theme that I can’t figure out? Maybe there’s something operating on a deeper level that I’m not being honest about, don’t want to fully face, or that I don’t really care about. If I really care about something, and feel that I must communicate it, then that urgency takes over and guides me, but if I don’t care enough, then I suppose that’s when I’d experience writer’s block.

Research.

To begin, I usually start with a combination of characters as well as more abstract themes and ideas -- one or two characters that are vivid and strong in my mind is enough to get me started, then minor ones eventually emerge. But

setting and location -- the city, the climate, the geography -- and time period is essential to my process and I like to research a lot first, reading a number of books and looking at various photographs from the era to get a sense of how things must have looked and felt, before I can really delve into scenes and characters. I love research and I love the old dusty antiquated library stacks -- losing myself in the stacks is the first step toward finding the story.

Develop the Fragments.

The best ideas happen at any time, so one must be ready to receive them -- I've written down thoughts while driving on the freeway (not recommended) or while listening to music in my car, or an idea will come when I'm doing something entirely different from writing (cooking, driving, taking care of my children) -- a phrase, an image, or an idea for a character or scene -- will arise and the important thing is to write it down, otherwise I'll forget it entirely later on. Then when I'm actually at my desk, will I develop the fragment and see if it becomes something real that I can use, or if it is just an ephemeral aspect of the creative process that doesn't serve the story.

The First Words.

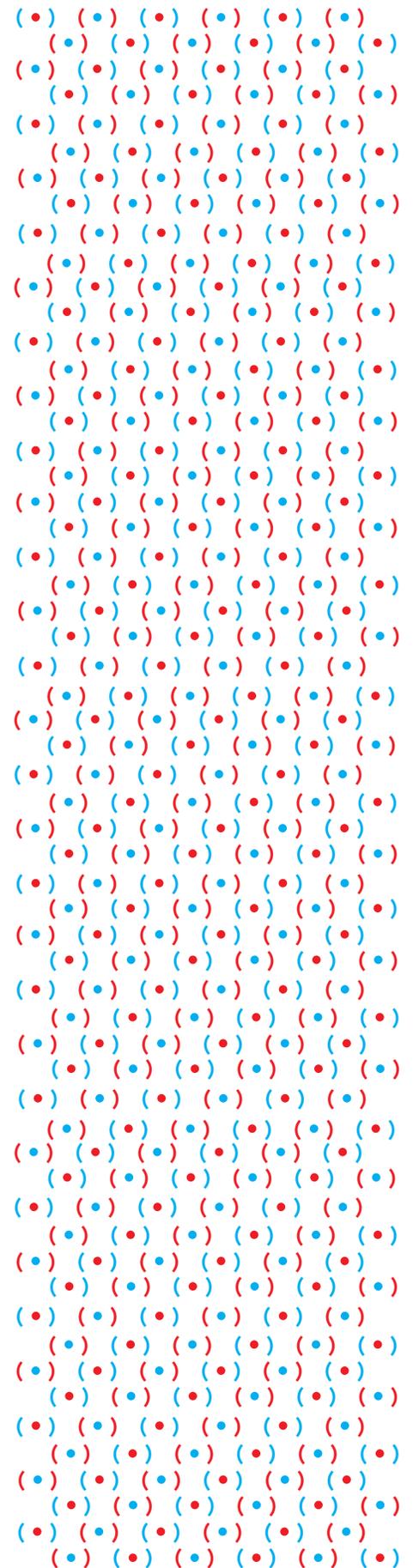
The first words of the story oftentimes remain the first words with little revision. But other things get

cut, added, or totally rewritten. I tend to overwrite so my main task is usually cutting away details, scenes and even characters that just end up slowing down the pace of the narrative. Even if something is interesting and well written, if the tension of the story is lost or lags because of it, I cut it. Sometimes this is hard, but it really helps to have outside readers advise you to get rid of it, and to have the confidence to cut, which is hard but ultimately useful.

A Set of Limitations.

I start a novel by usually writing up a 3-5 page summary of what the main plot points are in the narrative and what each character's arc is with the knowledge that I am writing this for the very purpose of later deviating from it. If anything, having some kind of outline/treatment helps me feel free enough to change things radically later on. Without any planning, the process feels too rudderless, as if sinking into an abyss with too many possibilities -- sometimes having a set of limitations results in greater creative freedom.

ALEXIS LANDAU is a graduate of Vassar College and received her MFA from Emerson College. She is pursuing her Ph.D. in English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Southern California. *The Empire of the Senses* is her first novel.



ADVICE FROM A COPY EDITOR

by **BENJAMIN DREYER**

Benjamin Dreyer is the VP Executive Managing Editor & Copy Chief of Random House Publishing Group. Below is a partial list of some of his favorite writerly stumbling blocks.

He stayed awhile; he stayed for a while.

Besides is other than; beside is next to.

The singular of biceps is biceps; the singular of triceps is triceps. There's no such thing as a bicep; there's no such thing as a tricep.

A blond man, a blond woman; he's a blond, she's a blonde.

A capital is a city (or a letter, or part of a column); a capitol is a building.

Something centers on something else, not around it.

If you're talking about a thrilling plot point, the word is climactic; if you're discussing the weather, the word is climatic.

A cornet is an instrument; a coronet is a crown.

One emigrates from a place; one immigrates to a place.

The word is enmity, not emnity.

One goes to work every day, or nearly, but eating lunch is an everyday occurrence.

A flair is a talent; a flare is an emergency signal.

A flier is someone who flies planes; a flyer is a piece of paper.

Free rein, not free reign.

To garner is to accumulate, as a waiter garners tips; to garnish (in the non-parsley meaning) is to take away, as the government garnishes one's wages; a garnishee is a person served with a garnishment; to garnishee is also to serve with a garnishment (that is, it's a synonym for "to garnish").

A gel is a jelly; it's also a transparent sheet used in stage lighting. When Jell-O sets, or when one's master plan takes final form, it either jells or gels (though I think the former is preferable).

Bears are grizzly; crimes are grisly. Cheap meat, of course, is gristly.

Coats go on hangers; planes go in hangars.



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