

# My Best Advice for Fiction Writers

Harvey Stanbrough

I'm writing this in mid December, 2022. With over 70 novels, 8 novellas, and well over 200 short stories written in 6 years, I feel qualified to pass along what I've learned in this much-abbreviated capsule.

Many of the individual points below could be expanded into a book-length discussion, as one reader (and a writing friend) already recommended. But the selfish truth is, I already know these things. I've applied Scott Carpenter's WIBBOW rule (Would I Be Better Off Writing fiction) and the answer is a resounding Yes.

So there you go. Feel free to search the Journal archives (<https://hestanbrough.com/the-daily-journal-archives/>) or the Journal itself (<https://hestanbrough.com/>) or my author website (<https://harveystanbrough.com>) for information on the writing or publishing topic of your choice.

Or buy my books on writing. You'll find those at <https://stonethreadpublishing.com/writing-books/> and in the Recommendations section at the end of this article.

But no matter. The core concepts, the core truths, are all presented here. These are a great deal more than I had when I started.

Do these concepts work? That's something only you can answer for yourself. But how many other people do you know who have written as much or more in six years?

Then again, I could have outlined, revised, sought critical input, rewrote and polished every novel and story, in which case I would have written maybe two or three short stories per year—so 12 to 18 short stories total—and 6 novels total. But as I'll get into later, hey, you do you.

Besides, a book about any of these concepts would only expand on them, as some of my books already have. But that's just silly, because

1. no amount of expansion and explanation of these concepts will help you if you refuse to try them, and
2. any expansion will be largely redundant and unnecessary if you *do* try them.

I suggest you ask yourself what you have to lose, and then go for it. But again, you do you.

## **Preface**

In this writing life, some things are fundamental. Chief among those is your relationship with your characters. That relationship informs how you treat your characters, and it's ultimately your choice.

You can choose to see yourself as being ABOVE your characters or you can choose to see yourself as being AMONG them. You can't do both.

If you've chosen the former, read on if you want, but unless you're willing to at least try to throw off the fears that have been piled on you practically since birth, there's really nothing I can do for you.

Still, you're welcome. I get through to around 1 in every 300 or so writers.

If you've chosen the latter—if you've chosen to see yourself as being *among* your characters—my sincere congratulations.

You could as easily have donned your official, flowing, Authorial robes and ascended into the great ivory tower, whence you would control every single stinkin' aspect of your characters' lives and story: every event, every twist and turn, every word that's said.

In other words, it wouldn't actually be your character's story. It would be something you consciously thought up and constructed, block by miserable block, then blamed on them.

But you didn't. You chose to be a participant. You chose to put on your jeans and a t-shirt and sneakers and roll off the parapet into the trenches of the story.

You chose to run through the story WITH your characters, trying to keep up and recording what happens and what is said as the story unfolds around all of you.

Now you are free to choose to Trust the characters to convey the story that they, not you, are living. You should keep reading this post, if nothing else for camaraderie.

Here are some pointers to help keep you on the straight and narrow. These comprise my best advice for fiction writers:

**1. Understand the difference between your story and your characters' story.** This is essential and fundamental to everything else.

In YOUR story, you are currently reading these words. Later, when you're writing fiction, you will not be conveying *your* story. You will be conveying your *characters'* story.

In YOUR story you will be sitting at table or desk or with your keyboard balanced on your lap or on a lap desk. Your fingers will be on the keys, and you'll be typing letters and punctuation and doing your best to keep up with your characters as you race through the story with them.

In your CHARACTERS' story, any number of things might be happening. But here's the real kicker:

**You can't "plan" or "plot" an authentic story. Life happens.**

**Authentic stories unfold in real time as they are lived and experienced.**

To convey your characters original, unique, authentic story, don't plan, and don't second guess them. What happened happened. *The characters* may add or subtract details as they go along. That's perfectly fine. It's their story, after all.

But remember, you are not a character in the story. You are only the reporter or recorder or typist or stenographer for your characters. As such, if you add or subtract details that you "decide" (conscious, critical mind) should be included or subtracted, you will veer far afield of that unique, original, authentic story.

But don't the characters and their story 'live' in your creative subconscious?

Maybe. Certainly in our limited human judgement, which we jealously guard as being "superior," they live in our creative subconscious. We certainly access them through our creative subconscious.

Other possibilities are just as plausible. I personally believe when I access my creative subconscious I'm actually opening a window onto another dimension, one in which the characters are going about their lives.

But it doesn't matter, does it?

Wherever you believe your characters reside—in your creative subconscious, in another dimension, in an alternate universe, or some other place—your two-fold task remains the same:

1. to enjoy and be entertained by their story yourself, and then
2. to convey their story in such a way that others may be entertained by it as well.

So how do you keep yourself out of your characters' story?

Pay attention to what's coming in through your creative subconscious.

Put your fingers on the keyboard, then type what you see and hear. Type what happens (in excruciating detail whenever possible) and the characters' reaction, both what they do and what they say.

Recognize that any fear-based or negative thought (Ooh, that can't be right; How will they ever get out of this? They can't do this; No, something's wrong here; That wouldn't happen like that; etc.) is from your conscious, critical mind.

If you can, simply ignore it and go on typing.

If you are unable to ignore it, break the connection with the story. Take your fingers off the keyboard, get up, and physically walk away.

As you do, tell your critical mind, aloud if you want, that it has no place in your fiction.

Consider—Your fear-response based, critical mind has no right to embellish or retell anyone else's story, whether it's the story of your spouse or parents or more physically distant relatives, the story of your neighbors across the street, or the story of your characters.

You don't know what will happen next even in your own story (your own life), much less what will happen next in your spouse's or parents' or siblings' or neighbors' or characters' lives.

Just let the characters' story unfold—just as you "let" your own and others' stories (and lives) unfold—and be there to record it as it does.

### ***By Way of Example, a Pop Quiz***

Please imagine that your distant cousin, who is rich or famous or infamous, asked you to write the story of one part of his or her life.

Maybe it was how s/he went about making that first million dollars, or maybe about the nomination, win, and acceptance of an Oscar for a performance in a film. Or maybe it was all about that last bank robbery, the one that failed and landed him or her in a high-security federal penitentiary.

Now imagine s/he somehow granted you full access to open a window into the past—to actually watch and listen as s/he made that first million or honed those acting chops or planned and carried out that bank robbery.

Would you

a. feel the need to outline or plot or plan what was going to happen in the story or embellish it afterward?  
Or would you

b. just watch, listen, and write it down as it actually happened?

If you chose b, yeah, me too. Because that would be the actual, authentic story, wouldn't it?

And don't say you can't change it because it was a "real" life whereas the other stuff you write is fiction.

Wrong.

First, memoir is much closer to fiction than nonfiction. It isn't an account of what actually happened. It's an account of what the POV character *remembers* happened. If you don't believe me, write even a brief a memoir about an event from your childhood, then invite comments from your parents and siblings.

But more importantly, the story from the exercise above is *your cousin's story*, not yours. Just as the story you write from your characters is your characters' story, not yours.

Finally, that's the end of my first bit of advice for fiction writers. If you've forgotten, the first point is Understand the difference between your story and your characters' story. I repeat it here because it really is essential and fundamental to everything else I'll talk about. If at this point you don't really get it, I recommend you go back and read it now.

**2. Heinlein's Business Habits for Writers is invaluable.** Heinlein's Rules are ridiculously difficult to follow and incredibly fun and fulfilling to attempt. Adhere to them. When you fall off (and you will fall off) get right back on as soon as possible.

For a free annotated copy of Heinlein's Rules, click <https://harveystanbrough.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Heinleins-Business-Habits-Annotated-2.pdf>.

**3. Every word of the story must come through the characters.**

Nothing more to say about that. If necessary, read it again, slowly.

**4. Any description of setting must come through the POV character.**

To lay to rest the myth of "too much" or "too little" description, any description that comes through the POV character can't be "too much." You can't "decide" (critical mind) whether anything is "too much" because you don't know what's going to happen later in the story. Duh. The POV character often will describe something that seems insignificant in the moment but plays a significant role later.

Conversely, ANY description that comes from the author (Mmm, I think maybe I should describe the shelves in the library) is always too much. Why? Because the source is external to the story. And that one description, if you allow your conscious mind to insert it, will throw the story off track.

Use all five of the POV character's (not the writer's) physical senses and at least one indicator of at least one emotional sense (fear, anger, irony, joy, hatred, etc.) in every major scene.

And no, you don't have to force anything on the character. The POV character WON'T use every sense to describe every setting. Take what s/he gives you. But if s/he describes something, don't alter the description and don't leave it out.

It dawned on me this morning that at the outside this series of posts is useful as a list of possible terms for you to type into the Search box on [hestanbrough.com](http://hestanbrough.com), [harveystanbrough.com](http://harveystanbrough.com) or in the Journal archives.

**5. Pacing. Pacing, pacing, pacing.** Sentence structure and paragraphing goes to pacing. Pacing dictates how fast or slowly the reader reads.

A few notes on sentence structure—

Longer, less-punctuated sentences (think flow) convey stronger emotion or convey emotion more strongly. Always. This is not opinion. It's fact.

Shorter sentences evoke drama and tension. Always. (However, overuse dilutes the intended effect.)

You may also insert dramatic segments into longer sentences through the appropriate use of punctuation.

It's insane to me that most fiction writers do not intimately know punctuation and how to wield it as a tool to direct the reading of their work.

To be frightened or unsure about one of the major tools in your writers' toolbox is just silly. If you have ANY questions about punctuation in fiction, pick up a copy of my [Punctuation for Writer 2nd Edition](#). If you can't afford it, email me at [harveystanbrough@gmail.com](mailto:harveystanbrough@gmail.com) and I'll send you a copy free.

Yes, I'm speaking to your conscious, critical mind here. Your conscious, critical mind is valuable in two ways:

1. It protects you from harm. (Hence your fear-based reaction when you think about writing without knowing in advance where a story is going.)

2. It enables you to learn. You learn with your conscious mind. Then your creative subconscious absorbs what you learn. Then you forget about it and apply what you learned with your creative subconscious as you write.

**6. Cliffhangers.** Put one at the end of every major scene and every chapter, period.

Most often, if you trust your characters and write into the dark, the appearance of a cliffhanger will startle even you and mark the end of a scene or chapter.

Emotional or psychological cliffhangers are more prevalent than physical cliffhangers, but any will do.

The cliffhanger is what makes the reader turn the page. Think of the cliffhanger as the near end of the hook.

**7. Hooks.** The hook isn't only for the opening of the story.

Yes, it's important to hook the reader physically and/or emotionally at the beginning of the story. But you also want to hook the reader at the beginning of every major scene and chapter. (See Grounding below.)

Think of the hook is the other end of the cliffhanger.

**8. Grounding.** Grounding also isn't only for the opening of the story.

Ground the reader in the setting BEFORE you get anywhere near the character actually doing anything (action).

Let the reader see, hear, smell, feel, and taste the setting and hear or see the POV character's opinion of that setting (or part of it). That's how we pull the reader into the story.

On that "POV character's opinion" thing—

Some POV characters, if they step outside and it's raining, will frown or say, "Aw man" or "Bummer" or "Damn it." Both the frown and the comment are expressions of an opinion.

Other POV characters (or the same POV character at a different time), if they step outside and it's raining will smile or say, "Oh, what a great day!" or "Cool!" etc.

Again, facial expressions, body language, and comments are expressions of an opinion.

**9. Don't Start with the Action.** To be clear, the stuff up there in Grounding means don't start with the action.

Note that the segment on Grounding had nothing whatsoever to do with "plot." The plot is the result of events happening and the characters either causing or reacting to those events. Don't attempt to plot or plan anything in advance.

Likewise, starting with the action is another myth. Yeah, I know. You've heard it forever. Just like you've heard forever that you have to plan (plot) the story before you write a word, and you have to revise, and you have to rewrite, and you have to seek critical input or "a second pair of eyes" or whatever.

Bovine excrement, folks, all of it.

If you just crossed your arms, absolutely determined that what I deride as myths really are necessary to writing good fiction, I probably can't help you. Only you can do that.

If there's any spark of the confident You still in there, the You who believes in yourself, the you who can do things without a lot of unnecessary handholding, stop reading this right now and go back to the beginning of this article. Then read it all slowly, absorbing it and making sure you understand each point before going on.

But if you have chosen to be irretrievably lost to the unreasoning fears (fears that have no actual consequences) and the myths that spring from them, I suggest you stop reading this and go find something fun to do.

Again, the effectiveness of everything in this article relies on your ability to understand the difference between Your story and your Character's story.

If you're steeped in the myths, I promise, you do not understand that difference.

And if you're invested in them, you *can't* understand that difference.

If you just said or thought, "But I *like* starting with the action"—Listen, if you really want to "start with the action," go ahead and do that. Then go back, write the opening, and stick it in front of the action scene. You're the writer, so unlike the reader, you're unstuck in time.

Start with action. Zero description. Have your faceless, clothingless, bodyless character with no name and no history race into a plain white setting with no dimensions, be it room, building, jungle or desert, to defuse an undescribed explosive something or other and somehow narrowly escape getting blown to smithereens.

Then ask your characters what happened in the few seconds or minutes or hours or days leading up to that action. Then listen to them, and write that to ground the reader—that's your opening—*then* get into the action.

As an interesting aside, most best-selling books that you believe started with action actually didn't. Most started with grounding the reader in the setting. But they did it in such a way that it drew you (the reader) into the story. The writer hooked and grounded you, and then the action started.

But don't believe me. Check for yourself. Use Amazon's Look Inside feature to read the opening of some novels.

### ***10. When your writing slows or bogs down, trust your characters.***

Just write the next sentence, then the next and the next. Soon the story will be racing along again. Yeah, I now, but it really is that simple.

a. If "Just Write the Next Sentence" doesn't work because there is no next sentence, read back a few paragraphs. Usually you'll find that you've written past the end of the scene or chapter. If that happens, start a new scene or chapter and Just Write the Next Sentence, etc.

b. If you're near the end of a novel, same thing. Read back a little. Usually you'll find that you wrote past the end of the novel. This has happened to me on three occasions. Same advice. Run a spell check, send the manuscript to your first reader, then start the next story.

***11. Keep Coming Back.*** As most of you know, I recommend having a daily word-count goal, something that

1. drives you to the writing 'puter, but

2. isn't difficult to reach if you stretch just a little.

I also recommend taking a break every hour or so. You can train your mind to call for a break at regular intervals, or you can just drink a lot of coffee or tea or whatever other beverage of your choice. Caffeine is your friend. If nothing else, it will drive you to go to the bathroom every so often. That's a break.

Sometimes a break is only a few seconds. I get out of my chair, walk to the front of the Hovel (about 20 feet) and back, and I'm ready for another writing session.

Sometimes I have to go up to the house. No problem. I do what I need to do there and then go back to the Hovel and my writing 'puter and the story. It's also not a problem if you have a planned much longer break, for example a trip to the store or the antique mall or whatever.

But sometimes the break is extended unintentionally. That's when it's a good idea to remember that you haven't reached your daily word count goal and discipline yourself to go back to your writing, even though maybe you don't feel like it.

The sense of accomplishment that will come to you when you reach or surpass your daily goal because you came back one more time is wonderful.

That is the essence of Keep Coming Back. That little mantra has enabled me to add tens of thousands of words to my stories and novels that I wouldn't have otherwise written.

**12. Following the Myths of Writing** will carry you farther and farther from your characters' unique, original, authentic story.

The big myths are all functions of the conscious, critical mind. NONE of them come from the creative subconscious, nor can you perform any of them from the creative subconscious.

Consider, the conscious mind can logically construct or build something, but it can't create anything original. It can't even come up with an original sentence or thought. Only your creative subconscious can do that.

**The stories you're writing come from the creative subconscious.**

**The fact that the myths do not should tell you something.**

The myths will tell you that you must, with your critical mind,

- a. construct an outline or plan or signposts or mind map or whatever before you begin writing
- b. revise what your characters have given you
- c. invite critical input, not only from your own critical mind by reading critically as you "look for" flaws, but from others—outsiders—just as if they could possibly have a more valuable opinion than any other reader on the face of the earth.
- d. rewrite (and then polish, whatever that means) according to that input.

You can make yourself feel better about seeking critical input by remembering that you can discard anything that "doesn't work" for you.

That sounds good on the surface, but remember, it isn't YOUR story, and it most definitely isn't your critique group's story.

It's your characters' story, so how about discarding what doesn't work for THEM? Which means anything that doesn't authentically happen in the story that they, not you, are living.

How can anyone, your critique group included, possibly know better than you how to write a story that's taking place in your head (other dimension, etc.)?



And how can even YOU possibly know better than the characters who are actually LIVING the story?

How about not rethinking and second-guessing and revising and rewriting what the characters gave you in the first place? How about trusting them? Or put another way, how would your cousin feel if you changed the details of the bank robbery?

### Believe in yourself. Defend your work.

You hear it even from traditional publishers and literary agents (neither of which I recommend) every day: They and readers all over the world are looking for unique, original, authentic stories.

Then they recommend revising, seeking critical input, rewriting, etc., all of which eats away at the "unique, original, authentic" story until it's no longer unique, original, or authentic. And when it finally looks and sounds like all the rest, they don't want it. And why would they? Again, believe in yourself. Defend your work.

You get to do the easy part, after all. You don't have to live the story, though you're welcome to fantasize about it. But your role is much less significant. You're the recorder.

**13. Finally, to Help You Safeguard** against rethinking what your characters give you in their story, you only have to remember this:

### Writers are the worst judges of their own work. Always.

You've heard that before, probably a million times. Any opinion, even your own, is only one opinion, and it doesn't count. Why? Because writers really *are* the worst judges of their own work. It's true. But it's true all the time, not only when you believe your work is good.

I find it ridiculously convenient that writers remember and swear by that old saying whenever they believe their work is actually Good. "Oh, it can't *really* be good; writers are the worst judges of their own work."

But when writers believe their work sucks canal water from all 50 states plus Puerto Rico and Guam, suddenly they forget they are the worst judges of their own work.

When a writer thinks his or her work is bad, the saying goes out the window, and the work goes into a desk drawer or the electronic equivalent, never to be seen again.

My friends, THAT is the result of buying into all those stupid myths.

How very sad that those writers are so unconfident in themselves and their abilities, yet simultaneously are so pretentious that they feel the right to prejudge what the reader will or won't like. Wow.

Even your opinion as the writer isn't any more valid than any other opinion. Because, again, It Isn't Your Story.

It's your characters' story, and the characters have already given you their opinion. All you have to do is write it down as it happens.

### Judging the story is the readers' job, not yours.

Your job is to write the story on behalf of your characters.

If you don't like your story or if some critic or other reader somewhere doesn't like it, so what? Ignore those opinions. They make no difference whatsoever to the readers who DO like it.

Let the characters' story stand as authentic. If you do that, the 10/80/10 rule will apply. Ten percent of those who read the story will love it, 80% will like it, and 10% will hate it, probably because they're having a bad day, it isn't in their genre of choice, etc. So don't sweat it.

Trust your characters. If you do, you will be the first to experience their unique, original, authentic story. As a bonus, you won't bore your readers to death with a story that's been revised and rewritten and "polished" until any unique, original voice is long since gone.

You are a lucky, lucky person. Once you learn to trust your characters, you only have to put your fingers on the keyboard, look in on the characters, and write down what you see and hear. Nothing could be easier or more fun. And I wouldn't change that for the world.

**14. You Do You.** Hey, it's only fiction. It's only a story of whatever length. In the overall scheme, it doesn't matter in the slightest except as it is valued by the individual reader.

I literally can't remember what most of my novels are about except in the most general terms (genre, theme). I can't remember the story itself, the major scenes, turning points, etc. That's how important a story is.

But then, specifically *because* it isn't important, I don't go over and over and over it. I follow the characters around, write down what happens and what they say and do as the story unfolds. That is incredibly entertaining. But when the story ends, I ship it off and move on to the next story.

Frankly, if you can remember major scenes, turning points, etc. from your own novel, I'd bet good money you're mired in the myths. But that's fine too. Hey, if you're comfortable there, snuggle in. I've certainly had my say.

In this series and for the past eight years I've done my best to give you a way out, a way to actually have fun and be entertained while you're conveying the stories that your characters, not you, are living.

If you trust yourself and your characters and write into the dark, the result will be a few minutes' or hours' entertainment for you, and then for the readers.

If you don't trust yourself and your characters—if you outline and revise and seek-and-apply critical input and rewrite and polish—the final result probably won't be entertaining for you. After all, you constructed the story block by block by miserable block, so you probably know the whole thing backward and forward.

Frankly, I really don't know how you do it. Once I've finished a story and learned the ending (almost always in less than a month), I can hardly wait to get it off my desk and move on to the next one. I can't even begin to imagine how anxious you are to get your story off your desk after you've lived with it for months or years, going over and over and over it. Ugh. But I digress.

Writing into the dark doesn't require you to "do" anything. It's only a suggestion that you stop doing things that are harmful to the unique, original, authentic story your characters gave you.

It isn't a set of requirements; it's a Zen-like letting go of requirements. It's running through the story with your characters, having fun with them, instead of controlling them and overstaying your welcome by months.

I hope you will at least try WITD, if only to prove or disprove it for yourself. But if you choose not to, that's all right too. It really is all up to you.

You do you. Write however you want. Seriously, I don't care. I learned a long time ago that what doesn't adversely affect my paycheck or my liberty is of no significance.

Anyway, there you go. Thanks for coming along. I've had a blast. I hope it's been enjoyable and informative for you too. Either way, I wish all of you the best.

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### **Recommendations for Reference and Craft Resources**

If you use Microsoft Word when you write and if you are not familiar with its Paragraph Formatting feature or its Find & Replace feature (in particular) I encourage you to visit my Downloads page at <https://harveystanbrough.com/downloads/> and click on the first link.

That will take you to my series of posts on Microsoft Word for Writers. The Paragraph Formatting and Find & Replace features are explained thoroughly there (along with all the other features), and learning to use them will greatly enhance your writing and save time with your formatting.

You might also browse that Downloads page for other useful resources. And right next door you'll find other Resources for Writers. Check it out.

### ***My Writing Books***

Not recommending my own nonfiction books on writing would just be insane. I don't pad them with a bunch of foo-foo BS. They're entertaining, informative and straightforward. To see all of them, visit <https://stonethreadpublishing.com/writing-books/>.

I especially recommend *Quiet the Critical Voice (and Write Fiction)*, *Writing the Character-Driven Story*, and *Punctuation for Writers*. Those are the three most important nonfiction books I've ever written. The others on the page are just as informative in their specific subject areas.

If you need help with publishing, I recommend *The Essentials of Digital Publishing*. Some of the information is slightly outdated, but wow is it a great step-by-step guide to publishing electronically.

### ***While we're at it, let's do a flash sale.***

I'll send you any three books from that page for \$20, and any seven books from that page for \$40. Email me to tell me which titles you want and your preferred eformat, then either mail a check or pay via PayPal, and I'll send them right out. (Mail your check to PO Box 604, St. David AZ 85630.)

### ***Dean Wesley Smith's Writing Books***

You can see all or most of Dean's writing books (WGM Publishing's Writer's Guides) at <https://wmgpublishinginc.com/writers/>.

I especially recommend *Writing Into the Dark*, *How to Write Fiction Sales Copy*, the two *Killing the Top Ten Sacred Cows* books, and *How to Write a Novel in Ten Days*.

I also recommend *Think Like A Publisher: A Step-By Step Guide to Publishing Your Own Books* at <https://www.amazon.com/dp/1463698224>.

### ***Lawrence Block's Writing Books***

You can find all or most of Lawrence Block's writing books at <https://lawrenceblock.com/series/books-for-writers/>.

### ***The World Intellectual Property Organization website***

In particular, "Valuing Intellectual Property Assets" at <https://www.wipo.int/sme/en/ip-valuation.html>.

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