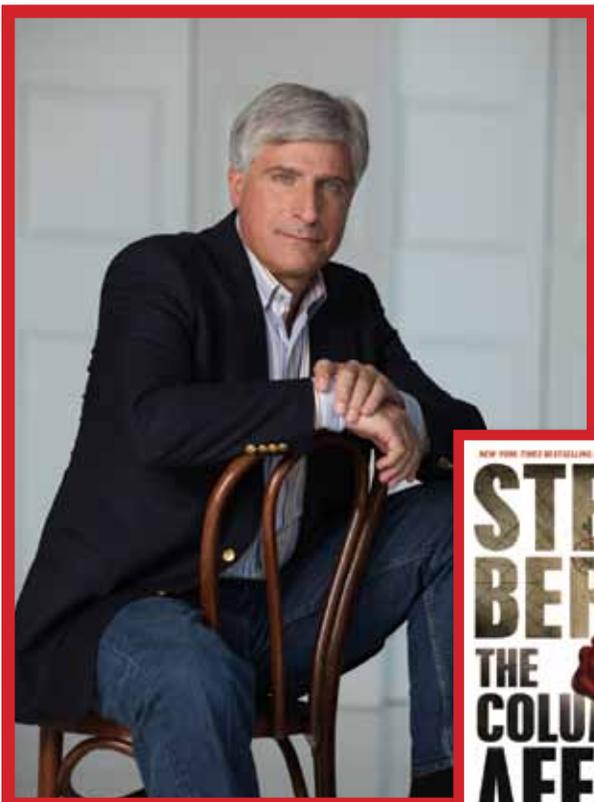




America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

Part I: Steve Berry's 11 Rules of Writing

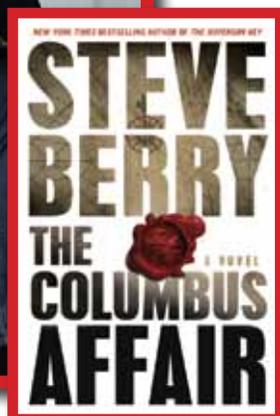
By Anthony J. Franze



In this series, author Anthony J. Franze interviews other suspense writers about their views on “the rules” of fiction. This month kicks off with bestseller Steve Berry’s “eleven rules.” In the July edition, several acclaimed authors—including Berry, David Baldacci, Robert Dugoni, Tess Gerritsen, Gayle Lynds, Brad Meltzer, and others—discuss the potential perils of following the conventional rules of fiction.

“When things slow down, bring in a man with a gun.” So goes a famous rule of suspense fiction. Nearly twenty years ago, John Grisham revealed that it was this rule—and nine others by suspense writer Brian Garfield—that helped him craft his groundbreaking novel, *The Firm*. A decade later, crime writer Elmore Leonard set forth his own ten rules.

Today however, many of the country’s most popular suspense writers don’t think in terms of rules. They are guided instead by their years of experience, their instincts, or their prerogative—earned through millions of books sold—to break conventional rules. When I asked bestselling author Brad Meltzer about the rules of suspense, for instance, he said, “The best rule of writing is this: There are no rules.” (More on Meltzer and others next month.)



But famed thriller writer Steve Berry disagrees. Berry not only embraces some hard-and-fast rules, he created a list of eleven that he follows religiously. When we talked, Berry presented these rules with the fluency and passion of a veteran college professor. I soon learned why: he's an accomplished instructor, having taught writing to audiences across the world. Through his foundation, History Matters, Berry has taught more than 1,500 students at writing workshops, raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for historical preservation projects.

There's obviously something to these eleven rules—Berry is a stalwart on the *New York Times* bestseller list with more than 14 million books in print. And his novels, including his most recent release “The Columbus Affair,” receive rave reviews. Without further ado, then, here are Berry's eleven commandments:

1 There are no rules. This is a curious first rule, I know, like the first rule of *Fight Club*—you don't talk about *Fight Club*. But Berry explained that what he means is “Do whatever you want—as long as it works.” He cautions newer writers however, not to ignore the rules until they've honed their craft. I was reminded of T.S. Eliot's advice, “It's not wise to violate rules until you know how to observe them.”

2 Don't bore the reader. Berry said he fights this every day. Boredom can come from word choice (no words a reader will have to look up in a dictionary, please); long flashback (he uses flashbacks “sparingly”); or even paragraph length (Berry follows a “two-finger rule”—no paragraph wider than two fingers). His cardinal rule for not boring readers, though, is more fundamental: “Stuff has to happen.” Said he: “If stuff isn't happening, it's not a thriller.”

3 Don't confuse the reader. Berry said the surest way to confuse a reader is to take a relaxed or lazy approach to point-of-view. “A reader needs to know who is telling the story in each section or chapter of the book. I don't go into two heads.” Berry is not alone here. Lee Child, who is no fan of fiction rules, has identified point-of-view as one of the few he follows strictly.

4 Don't get caught writing. “Don't break readers away from the story,” Berry said. For example, he hates “writer intrusions” in which the author provides information only the writer could know. Here, Berry sounds a bit like Elmore Leonard, who has one principle that sums up all ten of his own rules of fiction: “If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it.”

5 Don't lie to the reader. You can mislead and misdirect, Berry said, but never lie to the reader. Berry mentions the “deceptive narrator” from old-time fiction as a particular annoyance. Speaking of annoyances...

6 Don't annoy the reader. Berry said you don't want to distract the reader by annoying. As in life, in writing there are many ways to annoy. Clunky word choices and hard-to-pronounce character names are common annoyances. Also, many newer writers, he said, start dialogue with “well” (“Well, this, or Well, that.”). Berry said “I recently read a novel where the writer did this three hundred times. That's annoying and detracts from the story.”

7 Writing is re-writing. This applies to all writing, Berry said. I agree. When I used to teach legal writing and appellate law, I would point students to the following advice from a leading book on advocacy: “Sit down and write. Then revise. Then revise again. Finally, revise.” That's how Berry does it; he usually goes over a manuscript seventy to eighty times.

8 Writing is rhythm. “Everything has a flow,” Berry said. A lot of thrillers from new writers, he said, are “choppy.” “I want sentences to have a rhythm; a flow or a beat, almost like a song.” Reading the chapter aloud helps.

9 Shorter is always better. Again, this is true in most writing, not just thrillers. Berry uses this rule to explain his views on a novel's pace. “You should start the story as close to the end as possible.” Kurt

Vonnegut followed the same rule. This presupposes, of course, that you know the end of the book, which Berry thinks is important. “You need to know where you are going or it will waste a lot of time.”

10 Story never takes a vacation. This is Berry’s way of saying, avoid the “information dump.” He said it’s a challenge he faces because his novels are steeped in history. But the trick is weaving in the research sparingly and seamlessly. Too many writers, he said, think they can use dialogue to do a dump. That’s wrong.

11 Tell a damn good story. The most important rule of all. “A good story may forgive bad writing,” Berry said, “but good writing will not forgive a bad story.”

Rule #11 is a fitting conclusion to this article because it allows me to note that Berry has told another damn good story with his recent “The Columbus Affair.” It’s vintage Berry, taking readers on an exciting adventure that tests what they thought they knew about history, while keeping them up late at night until they turn the last page. The eleven rules seem to be working quite well. Aspiring suspense writers out there, take heed. ■

Anthony J. Franze is a lawyer in the Appellate and Supreme Court practice of a large Washington, D.C. law firm, and author of the debut legal thriller, “The Last Justice.” In addition to his writing and law practice, he is an adjunct professor of law, has been a commentator for Bloomberg, the National Law Journal and other news outlets, and is a contributing editor for the Big Thrill magazine. Anthony lives in the D.C. area with his wife and three children.

STEVE BERRY’S 11 RULES OF WRITING

1. There are no rules.
2. Don’t bore the reader.
3. Don’t confuse the reader.
4. Don’t get caught writing.
5. Don’t lie to the reader.
6. Don’t annoy the reader.
7. Writing is re-writing.
8. Writing is rhythm.
9. Shorter is always better.
10. Story never takes a vacation.
11. Tell a damn good story.

ELMORE LEONARD’S 10 RULES OF WRITING

1. Never open a book with weather.
2. Avoid prologues.
3. Never use a verb other than “said” to carry dialogue.
4. Never use an adverb to modify the verb “said.”
5. Keep your exclamation points under control.
6. Never use the words “suddenly” or “all hell broke loose.”
7. Use regional dialect, patois, sparingly.
8. Avoid detailed descriptions of characters.
9. Don’t go into great detail describing places and things.
10. Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip.

Source: “Writers on Writing; Easy on the Adverbs, Exclamation Points and Especially Hooptedoodle,” NY Times, Jul. 16, 2001

BRIAN GARFIELD’S 10 RULES FOR SUSPENSE FICTION USED BY JOHN GRISHAM

1. Start with action; explain it later (“an extension of Raymond Chandler’s famous dictum: When things slow down, bring in a man with a gun.”)
2. Make it tough for your protagonist.
3. Plant it early; pay it off later.
4. Give the protagonist the initiative.
5. Give the protagonist a personal stake.
6. Give the protagonist a tight time limit, and then shorten it.
7. Choose your character according to your own capacities, as well as his.
8. Know your destination before you set out.
9. Don’t rush in where angels fear to tread.
10. Don’t write anything you wouldn’t want to read.

Source: “Ten Rules for Suspense Fiction by Brian Garfield,” Writer’s Digest, 1973, reprinted in The Big Thrill, Mar. 26, 2008

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