



# America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

## THE STUDENT BECOMES THE MASTER: ANDREW GROSS ON WRITING

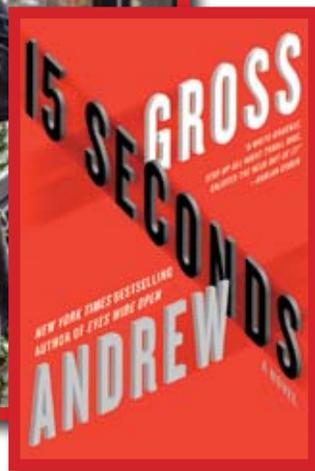
By Anthony J. Franze  
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*In this series, author Anthony J. Franze interviews other suspense writers about their views on “the rules” of fiction. This month, New York Times bestselling author Andrew Gross shares his sage advice. Next month, Anthony talks writing with Michael Palmer.*

Andrew Gross’s path to becoming a best-selling author has the makings of a suspense novel. It started with a telephone call fourteen years ago. Not from an agent or a publisher—he’d already received about twenty of those calls conveying that his first novel had been rejected. It was a cold call from another writer. A writer seeking a co-author for an upcoming series.

But this wasn’t some ordinary collaboration. The call was from James Patterson, one of the most successful authors in the world. “That call from Jim changed my writing life,” Gross said. And did it ever. The two went on to co-author not one, not two, but *five* number-one bestsellers.

Gross soon became a mega-success in his own right. Writing solo, he’s penned six *The New York Times* and international bestsellers, including the popular Ty Hauck



series and his latest thriller, “15 Seconds.” I recently sat down with Gross, who shared some techniques he picked up during his years working with Patterson—as well as his own spin on making the pages turn. For Gross, much comes down to four Ps: pace, point of view, plotting, and patience.

**PACE.** When it comes to pacing, everything in a book is a tradeoff, Gross said. You can give detailed character descriptions and backstory, provide elaborate descriptions of the setting, and exhaust a character’s inner thoughts, but the tradeoff is that it slows the pace. Alternatively, you can strip the prose down to nothing but culled-down dialogue and action, but that leads to a book lacking richness and texture. The trick, Gross said, is to find the right balance to meet your goals. For him, the goal is to keep the pages flying. And from working with Patterson, he learned that one way to do so is to cull every scene down to its elemental dramatic core. “Make each scene have a purpose and be sparse on anything that doesn’t directly achieve it,” Gross said.

It also helps to use crisp, short chapters. “The industry picked up on this from Patterson. It is now normal to have short chapters, three to five pages. There’s an insidious logic to it: It keeps the readers on the ledge and motivated to turn the page.” Ending that short chapter on a dramatic hook—a small cliffhanger or something that raises a question for the reader—also helps.

One other tip on pace from Gross: “Resist the urge to overweight detail. Don’t give the smell of the locker room to such a degree that it bogs down the story.” You don’t need to show your readers you are a weapons expert because your hero uses a gun, Gross said. Often *not* showing something is the best way to speed the pace and build suspense. “For example, in a police procedural, readers don’t need pages and pages walking through how evidence is processed. We’re all so anchored to television and movies that readers can see that coming. And the worst thing you can do is have the reader get ahead of what you’ve written.”

**POINT OF VIEW.** Gross said that many writing professors would argue that switching point of view in a novel—the main character in first person, other characters in third person, for instance—is out of bounds. Gross disagrees. “Something I picked up from Patterson is to write the main character in first person, but keep the villain and victim in third person. First person helps the reader feel what is happening and creates immediacy. As for third person, well, there’s nothing more intriguing to me than to get inside the head of a compelling bad guy or a terrified innocent person who’s about to have something unthinkable happen to them.” Gross said that there’s a broader lesson in his approach to point of view: writers need to be careful about rigidly following the conventional “rules” of writing. Patterson proved, he said, that many conventional rules were made to be broken.

**PLOTTING.** Suspense writers often fall into one of two camps: plotters (authors who draft detailed outlines before they begin to write) and pantsers (authors who write by the seat of their pants with no advance planning). Gross is a plotter. “I’m a strong believer in knowing where you’re going before you start. I deviate as needed, but outlining saves a tremendous amount of time along the way.” When Gross outlines, he makes sure that each scene has a purpose. If he can’t identify how the scene develops a character or moves the story forward, it’s gone.

As far as actually developing the plot, Gross had one major piece of advice for newer writers: “Keep raising what’s at stake!” Either for the world at large but especially for the hero emotionally. It is the best way to hold interest and propel a story. “If you start with a traffic accident,” Gross said, “don’t have the characters end up in traffic court.” At the same time, writers should not contrive a bigger plot where the story demands keeping it small.



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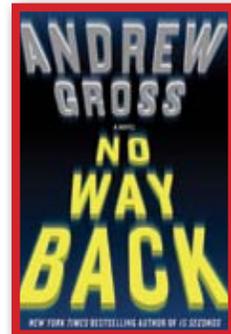
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**PATIENCE.** One of the best pieces of advice Gross said he can give to aspiring writers is patience. Beyond just persevering the slow road to finding an agent and publisher, Gross said, writers need to slow down stylistically. “Even now after writing a dozen books I remind myself that I need to have patience. When I feel like the draft is done I tell myself to keep editing; the magic for me often happens in the fourth or fifth or tenth draft—usually after I’ve turned in the manuscript to my editor and I have to beg for it back.”

Gross is patiently finalizing his next novel, “No Way Back.” The book is “about a happily married woman who goes to a bar, makes a terrible decision, and finds herself in a hotel room with another man. Life responds accordingly . . .” Set for an April 2013 and already receiving buzz, readers can expect another breakneck-paced tale from this student who became the master. ■

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