



America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction THE SEVEN (BAD) HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE WRITERS

By Anthony J. Franze

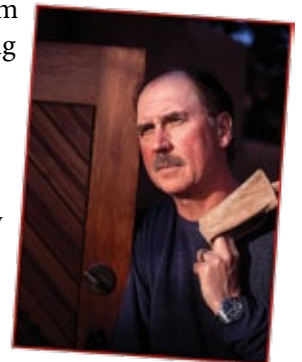
In this series, author Anthony J. Franze interviews other suspense writers about their views on “the rules” of fiction. For the past few months, Anthony has profiled authors who are teaching at this summer’s CraftFest, the International Thriller Writers’ writing school held during the organization’s annual ThrillerFest conference. This month, nearly a dozen CraftFest instructors, including ITW’s co-founders David Morrell and Gayle Lynds, identify recurring issues they see in the work of newer writers.

Shattering the adage, *those who can, do; those who can’t, teach*, some of the biggest names in fiction will teach this month at CraftFest, a writing school held during the International Thriller Writers (ITW) association’s annual conference in New York City. Dozens of renowned storytellers will teach nearly forty classes on a myriad of writing topics.

As a member of the 2013 CraftFest faculty (I know what you’re thinking, and I don’t know how it happened either), I had access to this impressive talent pool, and I couldn’t resist asking the CraftFest teachers a question of interest to readers of this series: “In the numerous manuscripts you’ve reviewed by newer writers, what’s the one main problem you’ve seen over and over?” The authors rose to the occasion and identified not only recurring problems—seven bad habits—of newer writers, but also some solutions.

BAD HABIT #1: FLASHBACKS AT THE BEGINNING

David Morrell, the father of the modern action novel—and author of the acclaimed new Victorian thriller, “Murder as a Fine Art”—identified the flashback as a major problem. “I frequently see minor flashbacks on the first pages of manuscripts. ‘Joe woke up with a terrible hangover. The previous night he’d been at his favorite bar and had drunk three more drinks than he should have.



He'd barely been able to find his car. Now he wondered where he'd parked it.' Moving a story backward on a first page is, by definition, not a good idea. It becomes a stylistic tic that shows up again and again in later parts of the story. I see this problem so often that I use it to determine my level of hope for the rest of the manuscript."

Morrell's fix? "Especially on a first page, step back and look for the number of times that 'had' is used. If there's a cluster of them, chances are they signal a minor flashback. On the theory that forward motion is essential on a first page, get rid of the flashback."



BAD HABIT #2: RUSHING THE ENDING

Gayle Lynds, the reigning queen of espionage, said it's the end of manuscripts where she often sees problems. "One of my biggest frustrations is spending four-hundred pages deeply involved in a novel only to have it end abruptly, in just a chapter or two. After that much time with the characters and their stories, readers want and need a sense of completion, of satisfaction. And if the book has been violent, they need a violent confrontation at the end for catharsis. It's true that not all subplots and characters need to be resolved in your ending, but at least work through the primary ones. For instance, because politics plays a large role in my books, my characters generally have somewhat happy endings, but the situation itself is likely to be bettered only for the time being, because that's the way it is in life."

Lynds said that if you've written a great tale and finish it with an ending "commensurate with the its length and weightiness," you'll find your readers will not only love what you've written, "they'll hunger for your next book."

BAD HABIT #3: TOO MUCH TELLING, NOT ENOUGH SHOWING

We all know the conventional rule of writing *show, don't tell*. The CraftFest authors, however, went beyond this general prohibition and identified some specific show-don't-tell problems they've observed in manuscripts. They also gave tips on how to avoid telling, not showing.

Linwood Barclay, the #1 international bestselling author of a dozen novels, including the highly anticipated, "A Tap on the Window" (Aug. 2013), said a mistake he's seen, and one he's made himself, is "having major plot developments happen 'off camera.' You don't want someone showing up and saying, "That time-bomb we were worried about? It just went off in Tuscaloosa."

Barclay's advice: "As much as possible, put your main character where the action is. Don't have her hear about someone finding a body. Let her be the one who finds the body. This heightens the suspense, gets your protagonist fully involved in the story. Best of all, you're showing the reader what happened, not telling. Get your hero to Tuscaloosa. She may not disarm the bomb in time, but she'll sure see what happens."



Catherine Coulter, the author of this month's hot release, "Bombshell," and more than sixty other *New York Times* bestsellers, identified the misuse of dialogue tags as the biggest problem she sees in manuscripts. "Dialogue followed by: he snorted, he gasped, she wailed, he gritted, she panted, he rasped, he complimented (common and grammatically wrong) and on and on. In addition, after dialogue, a 'said' followed by an adverb, e.g. she said haltingly, he said enthusiastically, she said cruelly, he said bitterly, and on and on."

The Fix: "Use 'said' or nothing at all. There are no synonyms for 'said.' It is merely an identifier. If you don't need to identify the speaker, use nothing, or some physical action, e.g., he walked to the window, then dialogue. By using an adjective in the place of said or tacking an adverb onto said, you aren't trusting that what you've written will tell the reader how the character is feeling."

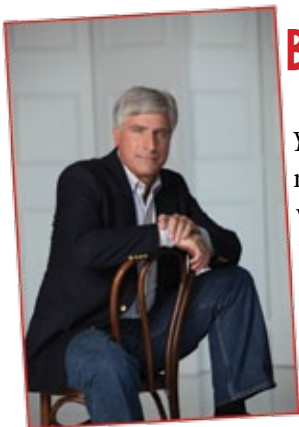
Stanley Trollip, the co-author of the exceptional Detective Kubu mysteries with Michael Sears (under the name Michael Stanley), agreed that too much telling is the main problem he sees in the work of newer writers. "When a new character is introduced, if the writer includes a long description of the character's background, how the character looks, and so on, that is telling. The effect of this telling is to break the flow of the story and, usually, to slow the action down. Similarly, descriptions of locations can disrupt the flow, detracting from the tension of the



story.”

As for how to tell, not show, the award-winning author of “Deadly Harvest” advised, “Almost always, the information a writer provides when telling the reader something can be incorporated into the action, into the dialog, or into how characters behave.” Trollip gave the following paragraph as an example: *As she walked home, Lesego’s head was full of Christmas. She knew her sister would save some of her tips and buy her a small present. Lesego had no money, so she was making Dikeledi a doily from scraps of red material left over from her needlework class. She was trying to embroider ‘Dikeledi’ across it in blue, but she’d made the first letters too big, and the whole word wouldn’t fit neatly. She frowned. She was going to have to start it again.*

“This probably leaves the reader with the impression that Lesego and Dikeledi are poor, that they are close, and that Lesego was young. But nowhere does it say those things. That is showing rather than telling.”



BAD HABIT #4: LACK OF STRUCTURE

Steve Berry, this year’s ITW Silver Bullet Award recipient whose books are staples on the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller lists, said a lack of structure is “a common flaw in nearly every new manuscript I read.” At CraftFest, Berry teaches a class titled, “The 6 C’s of Story Structure,” which include Character, Conflict, Crucible, Complications, Crisis, and Conclusion. “All six of these have to be created, developed, and resolved at precise points in the story. A failure to do that creates a snowball effect, one that cascades uncontrollably into an avalanche of problems. It’s like building a house. No matter how elegant, fancy, or clever the walls and decor ultimately are, if the foundation is not laid right underneath the whole thing will eventually crumble to the ground. I’m not saying that my writing is perfect on this. I make my share of mistakes, too. But I can say that I’m aware of structure and work hard to adhere. Many new writers today tend to ignore it.”

Berry’s advice on how to address the problem: “Unfortunately, there is only one way. Study your genre. See how writers structure their stories. Both the good ones and the bad. In fact, you can learn a lot more from the bad. Then write. After that, write some more. And keep writing and studying every day. The process never ends. I’ve been at it for twenty-three years and learn something new every day. All any writer can ever hope for is what they write today is better than yesterday, and what they write tomorrow will be better than today. That’s about as good as it gets.”

Leonardo Wild, the celebrated writer of eleven books and more than two-hundred articles (and ITW’s only member in Ecuador), said the biggest problems he sees is “a lack of understanding of what a scene is, how it is structured, and what are its functions within a story.” He said a first step is “to realize that there is no scene without three meta-elements: (1) Setting: where and when does a particular scene happen? (2) Characters: who are the characters that appear in the scene? (3) Conflict: what is the nature of the *main* conflict in a particular scene? Is it a physical conflict? A mental conflict? An emotional conflict?”



BAD HABIT #5: NO UNIQUE VOICE

Jenny Milchman, one of this year’s breakout debut authors, said, “Over and over I read a fine, workaday manuscript, only to be left wanting. What’s missing is the writer’s unique voice, style, and take on a novel. There are hundreds of thousands of novels out there. Our decision to try and add another is warranted only by our willingness to be daring, to take a leap into uncharted territory. When I read, I want to find something new. I want to *feel* something new. Give me that, and your novel will find its way.”

Milchman’s three tips: “(1) identify the books that have moved you the most and ask why; (2) practice entering a meditative state in which the voice telling you to play it safe is quieted; and (3) envision your novel as a movie and write each scene as if it were appearing before you on the screen. When you describe something—instead of being in that state of trying to be a writer—you sometimes bypass your inner editor and take off.”

Brandt Dodson, the author of the acclaimed *Sons of Jude* and *Colton Parker* series, said that “the most common problem

I've seen when reviewing manuscripts from newer writers is the lack of originality in the plot. I've seen two manuscripts in the last month alone in which the climactic moment is defined by the protagonist attempting to decide which wire to cut when defusing a bomb. Really?" Dodson's recommendation: "Read widely and read deeply. And don't be afraid to read outside your genre. Some foreknowledge of what's already been done can go a long way toward being original."



BAD HABIT #6: DIMINISHING A CHARACTER'S STATUS

Steven James, a critic's favorite and author of this month's must-read release, "The King," said a problem he's seen involves writers inadvertently lowering the main character's "status." What does he mean by status? "Well, in nearly every social encounter one person has, or is vying for, the higher status, or the more dominant position. By allowing the main character to become too submissive, too cold and unfeeling, or too weak and gimpy you can make the reader start to cheer for someone other than your hero."

James's guidance: "Remember that showing compassion and exhibiting self-control will always raise your character's status. So, if she is being tortured and screams out for help—low status. But if she clenches her teeth and refuses to cry out, higher status. If your detective arrives at a crime scene and scoffs and coldly assesses the facts—low status (he's not showing compassion). If he treats the dead with dignity and respect it raises his status. Show higher status by letting your character slow down—stillness is power. Also, choose verbs that portray self-control (he strode into the room) rather than the need for attention (she sashayed into the room, or she strutted across the room). Allow your hero to act heroic by letting him sacrifice for the good of people who are oppressed (emotionally, physically, financially, etc...), letting him turn the other cheek, and showing how he is not easily rattled."

BAD HABIT #7: TOO MUCH BACKSTORY

The seventh bad habit of newer writers is perhaps the most recurring: too much backstory. Nearly half of the CraftFest instructors I interviewed identified this as the main problem they see in manuscripts. For instance, **Karen Dionne**, the author of the exciting environmental thriller, "Boiling Point," and a member of ITW's Board, said "the most common mistakes I see in manuscripts from new writers are overexplaining, and including too much backstory in the opening pages." Dionne's answer: "Trust the reader. Don't explain every detail, and watch out for instances where you've said essentially the same thing twice. Remove all instances of backstory in the opening pages so that your story raises questions instead of answering them."



Other CraftFest teachers—**James Bruno**, **Lincoln Child**, **JT Ellison**, **Jamie Freveletti**, **Andrew Kaplan**, **Douglas Preston**, and **Alexandra Sokoloff**—also offered some great advice on how to avoid the backstory problem. So much so, that I'm dedicating next month's edition solely to addressing their views on backstory. Until then, want to learn more from these and other masters of suspense? Head over to CraftFest in New York on July 10-11. It could change your (writing) life. ■

**Anthony J. Franze is the author of the debut legal thriller, "The Last Justice." In addition to his writing, Anthony is a lawyer in the Appellate and Supreme Court practice of a major Washington, D.C. law firm and an adjunct professor of law. Anthony is active in the International Thriller Writers association where he Co-Chairs ITW's Debut Authors Program and is the Assistant Managing Editor of the Big Thrill magazine. Anthony lives in the D.C. area with his wife and three children. Learn more about Anthony at <http://www.anthonyfranzebooks.com/>*

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