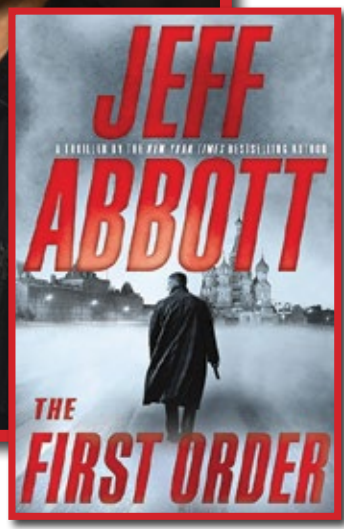
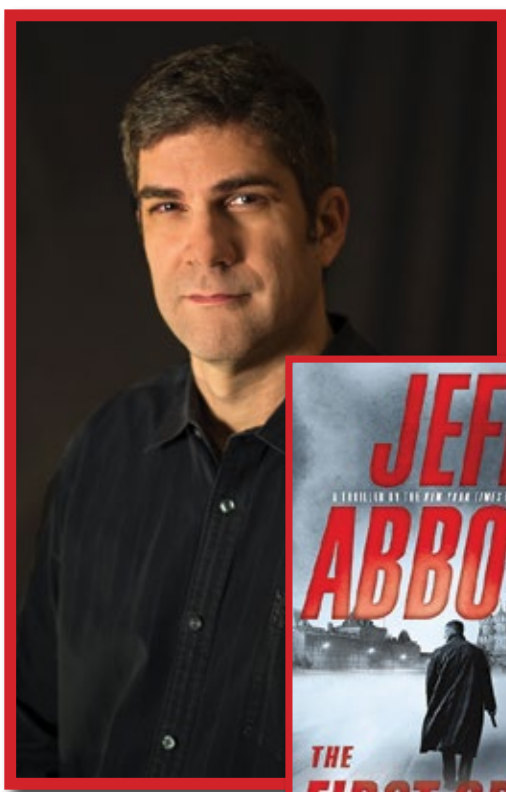




America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

THE PROFESSIONAL JEFF ABBOTT'S FIVE RULES

By Anthony Franze
Photo Credit: Provided by Author



In this series, author Anthony Franze interviews other suspense writers about “the rules” of writing. In this first article of 2016, Anthony talks with New York Times bestselling powerhouse, Jeff Abbott.

I still remember cracking open “Adrenaline,” the first novel in Jeff Abbott’s bestselling *Sam Capra* series. By page 15, Capra’s London CIA office explodes, his pregnant wife is kidnapped, and he’s branded a terrorist and traitor. I didn’t think Abbott could keep up that relentless pace for the rest of the book—but he did. And only an extraordinarily skilled writer could continue to build momentum five books later. Yet Abbott has done it again with “The First Order” (Grand Central, Jan. 5, 2016). This time, Abbott told me in a recent interview, “Sam Capra has to keep his brother from assassinating the Russian president.” According to *Library Journal*, the book has a massive first print run and “is being positioned as a breakout.”

None of this should come as a surprise to fans of Abbott. The Austin, Texas author has been writing acclaimed novels for more than two decades. When I asked him about his best advice to aspiring scribes, what I appreciated most about Abbott—beyond that he’s a humble and extremely likeable person—was his professional approach to the question. His rules aren’t abstract or theoretical, they’re practical—lessons learned from years of meeting deadlines



and understanding that publishing is both art and business. Here are five rules from a pro:

1. KNOW WHERE YOU'RE GOING

"The question I'm probably asked the most about writing is whether I outline. I do." But it wasn't always that way for Abbott. "I didn't outline early on, but I learned from experience that it is much harder to cut three chapters in a manuscript than three paragraphs in an outline." Outlining, Abbott said, also is a good exercise because it makes the writer think hard about the placement—or even the need for—a given scene.

Unlike some authors whose outlines can run more than 100 pages, Abbott's are typically five to ten pages. "I like to know the beginning and end of the story. The middle is more negotiable." His outline also changes as he writes the book. When he's about two-thirds done with the manuscript, "I assess things and 're-outline'; my outline is a living document."

Abbott acknowledged that many writers shun the outline, and he's fine with that. All writers should do what works for them, he said. But, he added, one of the common criticisms of outlining doesn't ring true for him. "I hear some authors say outlines lock you up, constrain your story, but my response is that you can edit the outline just as you would edit the book. I like to have a general outline as a blueprint. But if I get a better idea of where the story is headed or a character starts to assert herself in new and interesting ways, I give myself permission to deviate from the plan." At bottom, Abbott thinks that those who spurn the outline really *do* use one: "I think their first draft of the manuscript *is* their outline."

2. RESEARCH JUST ENOUGH TO GET STARTED

"I have a love-hate relationship with research," Abbott said. He hates the idea of doing research, but once he starts he often gets lost in it, reading things that have nothing to do with the story, getting off-task.

So over time he's developed a "policy": "Do just enough research to get the first one-hundred pages written." Abbott said this has many benefits. First, it prevents the use of research to procrastinate. A lot of aspiring writers get so caught up in research, he said, they never finish—or even start—the book. Second, his policy prevents wasting time on unnecessary research. "You often don't know what you will need until you're deeper into the manuscript." Abbott does just enough to get himself started, and takes notes along the way of things he needs to look up or possible areas to explore.

That's not to say that he uses everything he researches. Abbott said the writer must be selective to avoid the dreaded information dump. "For 'The First Order,' I read way more about Russian history and politics than I could ever use—it is probably one of my most research-intensive books. But I still ended up cutting two subplots with some interesting research to tighten the pace of the story."

3. FINISH THAT FIRST DRAFT—GET IT DONE!

"I believe in writing somewhat quickly, getting the story down; it can be bad, it can be a mess, but the key thing is to get it down." Abbott said that many new writers spend too much time perfecting the beginning of their manuscripts and never end up finishing. His advice is to power through; don't stop until there is a complete first draft.

His reasons are simple: you can't edit a blank page, and the work is meaningless if you don't make it to the end. "I'm sympathetic with new writers who focus so much on the beginning. That's what you show friends or beta readers to see if you are just wasting your time or if there's something there. But you won't really know until you finish the whole book."

Abbott said he is always moving forward. If he gets stuck on a scene, he moves to a later scene or to a new point-of-view



character. “I often put a note to myself ‘come back and fix’ so I keep forward momentum. I can always come back and polish or fix something later.” The common thread here, like his other rules, is efficiency. The sensibility of a career writer.

4. WRITING IS REWRITING

It’s an oft-repeated rule: *There’s no such thing as good writing, only rewriting.* Abbott said it seems obvious enough, but where he thinks some new writers go astray is with their idea of what “rewriting” means. “Many think rewriting is just going back over the first draft with a light hand, fixing some punctuation, correcting passive voice, and giving the manuscript a quick polish. That’s not rewriting.” Rewriting, Abbott said, is going back and looking at everything—prose, structure, pacing, scene balance—everything. “Finishing the first draft is just the beginning of the work. I look to whether scenes can be combined, whether a ‘talkie’ scene could be paired with an action scene for balance, whether the pacing works. I’ve cut not just a chapter, but a character if I needed to.”

Putting in this work, he said, is a “business decision.” In the competitive world of publishing—whether you’re new or established—“you can’t give anyone at the publishing house or an agent a reason to say ‘no.’” You need to deliver the best product you can, and that means working over that draft until you can no longer stand to read it.

5. REMEMBER YOUR MOST RELUCTANT READER

Abbott said that after more than twenty years as an author he has readers who will follow him from book to book. There’s also an established reader base for thriller and suspense novels. But to make it as an author, he said, you have to continue to bring in new readers. Thus, when he writes, he’s thinking not just of his fans or thriller lovers, but those readers who would never imagine reading popular fiction. He tries to write a book so good that the most reluctant reader would be pulled into the story.

“The best letter I ever got as an author was from a nineteen-year-old who was working on an oil rig in the North Sea. He wrote that the satellite TV went out on the rig, he’d watched all the DVDs available, and finished all the video games, and somebody had left a copy of my novel, ‘Panic,’ in the mess hall.” With absolutely no other means of entertainment, the man decided to give the novel a try. “He said he’d never read a book for pleasure—reading had always been a chore for school—and he didn’t know books like this existed. After he read my book, he said he asked his ‘mum’ to get him my other books for Christmas. I treasure this note. Someone far away who didn’t see any value in reading, and my novel reached him. He discovered the pleasure of a good book.” So many readers have discovered that pleasure through Abbott’s stories, and surely more will do so from the consummate professional’s latest page-turner, “The First Order.” ■

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