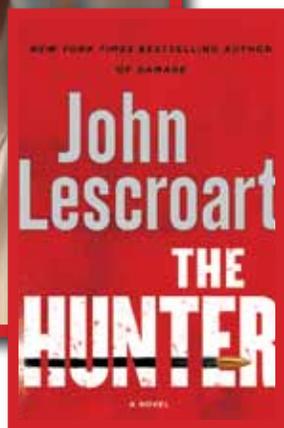
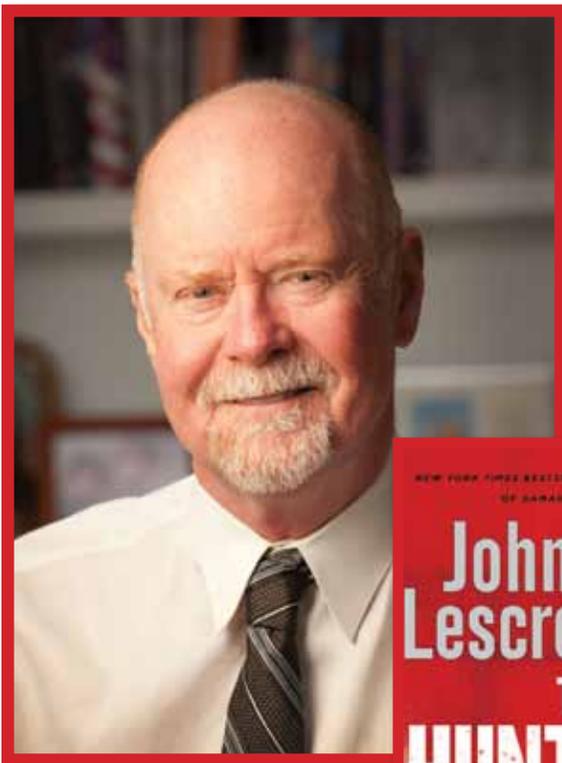


America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

John Lescroart and The Matrix

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, New York Times bestselling author John Lescroart shares his writing matrix. Next month, Anthony and Richard North Patterson discuss the writing process.

What is John Lescroart’s matrix? No, it’s not a computer simulation that controls humanity—though I’m tempted to refer to Lescroart as “Neo” or “The One,” given that he’s one of the best suspense writers in the country. Lescroart’s matrix is “a list of things writers ought to avoid if they want to have a real chance at getting published.”

Lescroart, the bestselling author of twenty-three acclaimed suspense novels, developed the matrix after years of teaching at writers conferences. The concept began when the Maui Writers Conference asked Lescroart to teach a course and sent him writing samples from the students.

“As I began reading the fourteen samples, I realized that every single one of them had the same exact problems,” he said. He circled in red the same issues over and over. Today, hundreds of writing conferences, manuscripts, and red circles later, Lescroart has refined the list to twelve problems that recur in the work of newer writers. He originally posted the matrix on his blog, <http://www.johnlescroart.com/>. I recently caught up with Lescroart and he elaborated on his dirty dozen:

1 Extricate Exposition. This is another way of saying “show, don’t tell.” Lescroart said many newer writers want to explain everything. “Sometimes you have to explain things, like in a legal thriller the reader may need to understand some procedure or how the law works. But don’t just tell the reader. Have it come out in dialogue or show it in the actions of the characters.”

Lescroart illustrates the point with a simple example: “Bill was sad.” Those three words give the reader some basic information about Bill, but little else. The reader doesn’t “see” Bill and has no real sense of Bill or Bill’s despair. Better, Lescroart said, is this: “Bill opened the door to his office, his shoulders sagging with an invisible weight. Inside, the door locked behind him, he stood still for a long moment until finally he sighed and crossed over to his desk. Lowering himself into his chair, he reached out and lifted the framed photograph of his wife that he’d turned face down when he’d heard the news. Seeing her smiling face, he set the picture back down, folded his arms on the desk, and rested his head down on them. He thought he might never move again, and wasn’t sure he ever wanted to.” The reader understands Bill because his sadness comes from his actions. “This is the very meaning of drama, and as such, is essential to effective storytelling.”

In his writing courses, Lescroart puts “Bill was sad” on the whiteboard and directs students to write a paragraph about Bill that doesn’t use the word “sad” (or synonyms) but that will make Lescroart believe that Bill isn’t just sad, but suicidal. Lescroart recalled that in one class he sent a student back to revise the paragraph so many times, the student started crying. “But the student got it,” Lescroart said with pride.

2 Put Aside Passive Voice. This rule, Lescroart admits, is “fifth-grade stuff.” But newer writers often forget the basics. “In the active voice, a subject does something (usually employing an active verb) to an object—*Joe hit the ball*. In the passive voice, an object is acted upon by a subject—*The ball was hit by Joe*.” The passive voice, Lescroart said, takes the reader out of the story. “It is looking backwards and you want to keep moving forward.”

Should a writer ever use the passive voice? “Only in dialogue, and only then when you want to make the speaker appear to be slimy, non-responsive, or disingenuous.” Lescroart uses the famous Watergate-era example, “mistakes were made.” That’s sleazy politician talk, he said, so it may work if your character is a sleazy politician. Otherwise, nix the passive voice.

3 Master Grammar. “You wouldn’t try and be a plumber without knowing how to use a wrench,” Lescroart said, “so you need to know the basics of grammar to be a writer.” This point may seem so obvious as to be ridiculous, Lescroart said. But, like all the issues in the matrix, Lescroart included this one after seeing recurring grammar problems in manuscripts. “I recommend that anyone who can’t immediately identify the parts of speech, much less can’t say for sure how many of these nettlesome things there are, put your pen down. Turn off your word processor. Stop trying to write right now.” Instead, buy a primer on the English language and memorize it. “Then read Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* and read it again.” Lescroart is not alone on Strunk & White. As I explained last month, all of Catherine Coulter’s ten rules of writing derive from the little book. For Lescroart, the bottom line is this: “If you can’t bother to learn the basics, you shouldn’t try and be a writer.”

4 Abandon Adverbs/Adjectives. This again is basic advice, Lescroart said, but he is surprised by how often newer writers use (and abuse) adjectives and adverbs. Tongue in cheek, he said that adjectives “result in a line of *poor, redundant, lackluster, non-essential* prose words that add nothing to the narrative.”

As for adverbs, his rule is simple: “Just don’t use ‘em at all.” The adverb is closely connected to exposition (#1 above) because adverbs are about telling the reader what is happening, not showing. Don’t write, “He sat down *angrily* at his desk.” Write, “He sat down at his desk, picked up his fountain pen, and stabbed the nib into his blotter, then threw the damn thing across the room.” Don’t write, “She *carefully* removed the spider from the teacup.” Write, “She reached down with her thumb and index finger and lifted the spider from the teacup.”

5 Cut Contradiction. Lescroart said the hundreds of manuscripts he reviews often contain obvious inconsistencies. In one chapter the manuscript says the character has beautiful blue eyes, in another chapter the same character has brown eyes. The problem also sneaks into manuscripts in other ways, such as when the writer has an overweight character running a four-minute mile. The good news, Lescroart said, is that this is an easy fix with careful proofreading. The rule in fact is just an illustration of one of Lescroart’s broader tenets: “There is no good writing, just good rewriting.”

6 Avoid Cliché (like the plaque). Never use cliché, Lescroart said. “And for God’s sake, don’t use it as the first sentence of your book.” Lescroart said students often will justify using cliché or jargon in dialogue because “that’s the way people really talk.” That may be true, “but that doesn’t mean your dialogue should reflect this reality. Why? Because you’re not trying to write reality—you’re trying to write fiction. Which, okay, mimics reality. But it’s better than that, or should be. Fiction is reality passed through the sieve of creativity so that the dull or stupid parts

are removed.” Lescroart said that if you’ve ever read transcripts of a real-life conversations you’d quickly realize how few interesting things people say. For Lescroart, if a writer uses cliché it is the equivalent of posting a billboard that says, “I have nothing new to say. I am not creative.”

7 The Yuck Factor. Lescroart said that writers should avoid getting into the details of things no one wants to read. “A detailed description of the chunks in vomit. Gross things like a character picking his nose. No one wants to read that. Find a different way to make them gross if that’s your goal.”

8 Eradicate the Echo. Echo is the use of the same or similar word over and over and over and over again. Lescroart called it a “lurking enemy” that writers should eliminate from their manuscripts. The problem indicates a lack of careful proofreading. Lescroart acknowledged that some great writers recommend using only the same word—“said”—to follow dialogue. But he disagrees. “Sometimes it’s good to say ‘he *replied*’ or ‘she *stumbled*.’ It’s about flow and the sound of the words, not some rigid rule about using the same word.”

9 Discard the False/Negative Descriptors. Lescroart said that this is a more subtle problem, but easy to identify if the writer is aware of its existence. A false or negative descriptor is setting a scene by describing what is not there: “Normally the wind went howling through the canyon, swirling clouds of dust in its wake, although today the weather was calm and mild” or “If Tom were here, he’d be wearing a jacket.” The reader doesn’t need to know about weather that isn’t there or people who aren’t there. “As writers, we want to keep our readers focused on the here and now of the story, and not on things that are not actually in the story.”

10 Un-do the Unclear Antecedent. This is a common mistake where the writer is sloppy with pronouns—he, she, it, him, her, they. “Jim ran to the store while Carlos took his bike. When he got home . . .” Who is the “he” in the sentence? Jim or Carlos? “I used to think it made prose ‘clunky’ or inelegant if I repeated an antecedent, as in ‘Jim ran to the store while Carlos took his bike. When Carlos got home . . .’ Actually, though, this construction is far preferable to one where clarity is not assured.” Lescroart cautions writers to pay particular attention to the word “it.” “In any given paragraph, there might be five or six acceptable candidates for an antecedent to ‘it,’ but clearly the writer means to refer to only one of them with this particular ‘it.’”

11 Reduce Redundancy. Lescroart’s favorite example of this principle is the Monty Python tag line, “Department of Redundancy Department.” Redundancy takes many forms, including using the same word (#8 above). But writers should watch out for other types of redundancy, such as when the writer already has said or described something adequately, but repeats the point later in a different way. If the writer describes the character as “portly, disheveled, and blond,” the writer need not later describe him as “fat” or “heavy-set”; “sloppy.” If the writer has described the character sweating and taking off her jacket, there is no need to say it is a hot day. The writer needs to “trust your readers and that they’d ‘get it.’ And make sure they do without over explaining.”

12 Wrong Word. Another recurring issue Lescroart has seen in manuscripts is the use of the wrong word. This is not just the obvious incorrect usage of a word (“desert” instead of “dessert”; “affect” for “effect”). It also is the incorrect word for the image the writer is trying to convey. For instance, writing “Her fine skin stretched like marble.” Marble doesn’t stretch. Also, avoid using big words for the sake of using big words. “Vocab snobs,” he said, turn the reader off.

Reflecting on his matrix, Lescroart acknowledged that Lee Child and several other thriller writers have disavowed many of the conventional rules of writing. Lescroart takes a middle ground. “If you can make it work, there are no rules.” At the same time, when writers are starting out, they need to know the basics and should use caution when breaking the conventional rules. “Lee Child is a genius. If Lee wanted to write in passive voice, readers would want to see where he’s going, but not so with writers who haven’t proven themselves.” Violate the matrix as a new writer, Lescroart said, and an agent or editor likely is going to think the writer doesn’t understand the basics. “At a minimum, if writers master these twelve simple problems,” Lescroart said, “they will be 150% better writers.” ■

**Anthony J. Franze is a lawyer in the Appellate and Supreme Court practice of a major 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.*

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