wild ink

Success Secrets to Writing and Publishing in the Young Adult Market

Second Edition

“An indispensable reference...” —Amy Kathleen Ryan

Includes insider tips and tricks from best-selling YA authors

Gives writers techniques for writing fiction and nonfiction for a teen audience

Provides an overview of the growing YA market

Offers advice on publishing, self-publishing, editing, and marketing books

Victoria Hanley
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# table of contents

**Introduction**  
ix  

**chapter 1**  
The YA Genre and You  
1  

**chapter 2**  
Getting Your Book in Shape: Novel Writing, Part 1  
25  

**chapter 3**  
Getting Your Book in Shape: Novel Writing, Part 2  
57  

**chapter 4**  
Writing YA Nonfiction  
83  

**chapter 5**  
Obstacles and Demons  
99  

**chapter 6**  
Resources for Writers  
111  

**chapter 7**  
Submitting Your Manuscript  
125  

**chapter 8**  
Getting Your Book Traditionally Published  
145  

**chapter 9**  
Marketing Your Book  
171  

**chapter 10**  
Self-Publishing Your Book  
185  

**chapter 11**  
Interviews With YA Authors  
201  

The End  
285  

References  
287  

About the Author  
289
This edition of Wild Ink has three new chapters: two on novel writing and another on writing YA nonfiction. Other chapters have been revised and updated, and additional interviews with authors, editors, and agents are included.

Originally, this book grew out of workshops I’ve given at writing conferences. The young adult (YA) market is flourishing, and eager workshop participants have been full of questions—so many questions it would take a book to answer them all.

If you’ve been wondering whether writing for the YA market is for you, by the end of this book I hope you’ll have a good idea of whether the answer is “yes” or “no.” Besides offering plenty of down-to-earth tips, Wild Ink aims to help you explore unknown territory, tread risky ground, and bring buried dreams into the open.

Write that book!

Victoria Hanley
Chapter 2

Getting Your Book In Shape:
Novel Writing, Part 1

The key, I have found, is to find whatever ways you can to get to the end.
—T. A. Barron

From Wild Ink by Victoria Hanley,
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Writing any book is quite a process, a delightful, infuriating, discouraging, and inspiring process. In fact, pick an emotion. Whatever it is, you’re sure to come across it multiple times somewhere between the beginning and the end of your writing endeavor. Just remember that difficult emotions are not a reason to stop writing. They’re normal, natural, and to be expected.

Although it’s true that you might get through whole sections of your book with ease and sunshine, it’s also true that you’re bound to hit the sucky swamp and wonder why you ever started writing in the first place. And what’s easy for you might feel like an endless bog to the next writer. For example, I detest writing first drafts, but to me there’s no finer treat than doing final revisions. My writing buddy Jeannie Mobley feels the opposite way. She gets excited about first drafts and loathes revising.

Depending on your temperament, many different elements of writing can trigger sweaty panic: first drafts, beginnings, middles, endings, conflict, setting, characterization, dialogue, plotting, voice, point of view, showing and telling, and revisions. We’re about to go over every one of these areas with an emphasis on writing YA. But before we do, I’d like to point out that *Wild Ink* is not designed to get you started from scratch. If it were, these chapters on getting your novel in shape would be twice as long. So if you’re brand new to novel writing, please take advantage of the many books and resources out there to help you hone your craft. (You’ll find a partial list in Chapter 6.) There are plenty of marvelous writing guides for beginners! (I’ve written one called *Seize the Story*.) But the writing advice here is directed at those who have already written at least half of a novel.

Ready? Off we go!

**first drafts**

If you think first drafts are shiny and fun, please accept my congratulations and then skip ahead to the next section—about beginnings.

The rest of you, hang in with me.

First drafts. Sigh. Really, the only way to get through a first draft is to get through it. Bleah! And furthermore, ack. Not to mention, bleah-ack.
Sketchy at Best

First drafts are to writers as sketches are to artists. They’re not meant to be the final artwork. They’re meant to allow you to get some communication going between yourself and your story. And unlike doing revisions and polishing your pages, writing a first draft is about letting things be messy and uncertain. You’re exploring a story idea. Explorers do not know in advance what they will discover, nor do they know exactly where they’re going when they set out.

Should You Outline?

Should you outline before writing your first draft? That’s a question only you can answer. My informal polling of fiction writers reports that only about a third of them outline their books before writing. And those who do always diverge from their outline as soon as their characters show any spunk. The consensus: There will be times when all you can do is wander around lost. That’s when it’s easiest to give up and most important to keep going.

Many authors develop rituals to help keep up their momentum. Write 500 words, stand up, brew some coffee or tea, go a few rounds with a hula hoop, talk to the cat, write another 500 words. Whatever works for you, rituals can provide a framework to keep you on track.

Set word-count goals for each day and keep them. Ideally, your goals will be high enough to challenge you but not so high that you’re bound to fail. The idea is to develop consistency and momentum. It’s perfectly fine to start small. Even 200 words a day, 6 days a week is 62,400 words in a year, which is a reasonable length for a YA novel’s first draft.

National Novel Writing Month

Have you heard of National Novel Writing Month, which happens each November? Affectionately known as NaNoWriMo, or NaNo for short, this program has helped thousands of people gain enough momentum to get through a first draft. The goal for NaNo is to write 50,000 words in a month. That’s 1,667 words a day for 30 days, or it’s 2,500 words 5 days a week for 4 weeks—or whatever combination
you customize. The mindset is one of cranking those words out. Pay no attention to careful wording, exquisite characterization, or nuanced subplots. Quantity over quality. Just get it done! And there’s something about joining other people who have the same goal as you do that creates an atmosphere: All participants get to feed off the energy of the totality. If you haven’t already tried NaNo, why not sign up for the next round? Just go to http://www.nanowrimo.org to learn more.

Critique groups or writing buddies can help keep you accountable with your word count goals throughout the year. Sometimes I’ll meet with a writing buddy just to sit across the table from each other and write. I also meet with my critique group once a week. Knowing that they’re going to be there with pages and expect me to be there, keeps me from weaseling out of writing.

In short, get that first draft written! When it’s done, admire it in all of its abominable glory. Once you have a draft, you get to start over again—from the beginning.

beginnings

Have you started at the beginning? Just so you know, most writers do not. (This morning, I cut out the beginning of a novel I’d been working on for a year and a half.) Why is this? Because there’s a tendency to cover too much of the backstory in the first chapters without realizing it.

How do you know where a story begins? You want to be in media res, which means “in the middle of things.” Think of your own favorite YA books. Where do they start?

Let’s look at two popular YA level books, one classic and one modern, both with wide readerships: Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen (1813/1996) and The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins (2008). Pride and Prejudice has demonstrated lasting appeal: Although it was first published in 1813, it has continued to captivate new fans in each succeeding generation. The Hunger Games is also likely to reach new readers for years to come; as of now, there are millions of copies in print.
The beginning of *Pride and Prejudice* shows that Jane Austen really understood the concept of *in media res*. She didn’t start her novel with the birth of Jane Bennet and then her sister Elizabeth. She began when the sisters were young women, on the day that Charles Bingley and his fascinating friend Mr. Darcy were about to enter the picture. Conceivably, Austen could have begun with scenes of family life as the elder Bennet girls learned their manners and gradually reached a marriageable age. But if she had dithered around in the backstory that way, Austen would not be one of the most beloved novelists of all time.

*The Hunger Games* begins with a short section establishing 16-year-old Katniss Everdeen’s daily life: her skill with a bow developed by hunting with her friend, Gale; her love for her younger sister, Primrose; her anger toward her depressed mother who is mourning the loss of Katniss’s father. The first scenes make it clear that Katniss lives a straitened existence under an oppressive regime. Then the story moves rapidly to the moment when Katniss volunteers to take Prim’s place in the Hunger Games, precipitating a confluence of dangers. If Suzanne Collins had drawn out her beginning to include the gradual intensification of hardships endured by the people in her dystopian world, it would have taken too long to get her protagonist into the arena of the games.

Scrutinize your own opening chapter. Maybe you’ve spent time tweaking and retweaking every sentence. But now it’s time to ask yourself if your beginning is actually the point where your main character’s life is about to change dramatically.

Sometimes it helps to try pretending that your book starts with Chapter 2. Would Chapter 1 really be missed? Might it be boiled down to a sentence that fits into Chapter 2? If so, you must get rid of the existing Chapter 1.

Writers have trouble with this, becoming quite attached to the beginning that’s already there. Throwing out a whole chapter (or two or three) can even feel so traumatic that authors have referred to it as “killing your darlings.” Real tears are shed over this. But hanging on to a first chapter that doesn’t belong in your book would be like . . . well, carrying around the placenta after a child is born. Your initial beginning may have taken you—the writer—into your novel, but will it do the same for your readers? What gets you started is almost never the same as what gets the story started. Learning to recognize the difference is critical to your success.
as a writer. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen writers confuse their own entry point with the true beginning of their novel. Why do so many make this mistake? My theory: Writing an entire novel is such a big deal, if we didn’t start with something familiar and friendly, we’d be too intimidated to begin at all.

When you write your beginning, maybe you feel more secure starting with a description of your protagonist’s dinner table, or a meandering road, or a bird building a nest. And if writing about your hero’s breakfast gets you going and takes you all the way to Chapter 2, great! Go ahead and write about crisp crumbs falling from a toasted muffin, and blackberry jam dripping artfully onto a plate. But unless it’s really integral to *in media res*, the chapter that opens the way for you as a writer must be tossed.

**Bits and Pieces**

If you can’t bring yourself to get rid of those delicious words you’ve written, here’s another important tip: *highlight and move*. Or, if you prefer: *cut and paste*. Here’s how it’s done: Start a new document and save it as “bits and pieces of (fill in the name of your novel).” Determine exactly how much of the first chapter (or second and possibly third chapters) is getting in the way of a strong opening. Highlight those sections, then use the cut and paste feature to place them into the bits and pieces document. Voila! You have solved the problem. You don’t have to slaughter your beloved sentences; all you need to do is move them. (Hint: This method can be used anywhere in your book.)

It *is* possible that you’ll use a few lines from that bits and pieces file somewhere else. Maybe, as your protagonist confronts onerous complications, she has a moment remembering the simple delights of breakfast back home. If so, your details about blackberry jam will create verisimilitude. Fine. It’s all good, so long as you don’t add something that doesn’t belong just because it’s well written.
Turning Points

In your opening chapter, you’ll establish what life is like for your protagonist right before the turning point that launches your story. What is a turning point? It’s a point of decision, a crossroads where the protagonist must face something that makes it impossible to continue in the same direction and also impossible to go back. These turning points happen throughout a novel, but there will be a significant turning point somewhere close to the start, and it’s known as the *inciting incident*. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet meets Mr. Darcy on page 15, and his pride ignites her prejudice. This incident sets off everything that follows. At the end of Chapter 1 of *The Hunger Games*, Primrose Everdeen’s name is picked to be a tribute. Katniss then volunteers to take her sister’s place, which puts the rest of the main action into motion.

In the YA genre today, it’s best if the inciting incident occurs within the first 10–15 pages. Any later than that, and you’ve probably earned yourself a rejection slip. If your story allows, it’s even better to get to the inciting incident by page 5.

You’ll create a series of greater and lesser turning points as your story gets off the ground and your characters establish who they are. Mr. Bingley is smitten with Jane Bennet. Mr. Wickham appears and charms the young ladies. Katniss leaves for the Capitol and meets her stylist and the people she’ll be fighting.

Difference Between a Chapter and a Scene

What is the difference between a chapter and a scene? A scene is part of a story with a particular focus and mood. It has a beginning, middle, and end, usually in a single location. A chapter may consist of multiple scenes or only one, depending on the way the author structures his or her novel. Chapters usually end at a turning point, which can be either big or small.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the first chapter consists of a single scene, a conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. But the first chapter of *The Hunger Games* has several short scenes, and each of them contributes to the understanding of Katniss’s daily life before Prim’s name is drawn and everything changes.
In general, scenes in YA novels are shorter than scenes in books written for adults. Chapters may be long or short depending on the individual writer. The idea is to keep the pace moving.

Pacing

What does pacing really mean when writing YA? Pacing refers to what happens to whom and how fast. It’s also about what you leave out and what you put in.

If you leave out too much, your story will become lifeless or too confusing to follow. How and why does Mrs. Bennet speak to her husband about Mr. Bingley? This is important. What are the rules of the Hunger Games lottery? Give your readers what they need to know, but don’t give them too much. Too many details will bog down your book. We don’t need to know every last ruffle on the gowns that Elizabeth Bennet wears in the presence of Mr. Darcy. We don’t need a painstaking description of each bowstring Katniss Everdeen might draw.

Beginnings and Endings Are Connected

Another thing to consider about your beginning: It has a close relationship with your ending. So until you know the ending, you don’t really know where your book truly starts. The endings for Pride and Prejudice and The Hunger Games are completely connected to their beginnings. The Bennet sisters get married. Katniss survives the grueling games.

plotting

“How do you come up with a plot?” is one of the most frequent questions I’ve been asked. Plenty of writers struggle with plotting, so don’t feel alone if you’re one of them.
Germinal Ideas

Book ideas come about in mysterious ways. Sometimes, they seem to arise fully formed. More often, there’s only a vague notion to start with.

In the quest for ideas, many writers find it useful to ask “What if?” (What if a fashion disaster changed a teenager’s life? What if a tyrant succeeded in controlling technology? What if a teenage girl met Sherlock Holmes when he was 54?) By marinating in the imaginative space between waking and sleeping, the unconscious mind may deliver enticing scraps of dreams. (What if a princess could see any future but her own?) It can also be fun to brainstorm with friends. (What would Jane Austen say if she met you and me?) Whatever your personal creative style may be, it’s worth exploring.

Cause and Effect

Cause and effect is a vital concept when building a plot. In fiction, when characters change, the reasons are clear. Scenes build on each other in a way that readers can follow. Dots are connected. Coincidences are to be avoided, especially if they resolve sticky plot points.

“But,” people say, “that’s not always true in reality.” And yes, in daily life, coincidences are everywhere; things happen even when the dots cannot be connected or the dots are invisible. But not so in fiction. Actions taken in one part of the story lead to actions taken in another. Action, reaction. Cause and effect. This principle is integral to creating a convincing plot.

Important as the concept of cause and effect may be, it doesn’t account for a strong plot all by itself. There is also the underlying structure of the story to consider. The best book I’ve found on the subject of story structure is The Seven Basic Plots by Christopher Booker (2004). This impressive and scholarly work lays out the structure of seven plots and uses numerous examples to explore the permutations of each. It deserves careful reading from start to finish.
## Overview of the Seven Plots

To give you a taste of what you’ll find in *The Seven Basic Plots*, I’ve paraphrased and consolidated each one. As you look through them, keep an eye out for which of the seven fit(s) your own novel.

1. **Overcoming the Monster** (*Dracula, Harry Potter*)
   - Protagonist hears of a monster, which may be human or nonhuman.
   - Protagonist experiences initial success and thinks the monster can be overcome.
   - Setbacks! The monster proves to be worse than the protagonist knew.
   - Ordeal: The monster shows itself—and it’s bad! Protagonist is nearly defeated.
   - Escape for the protagonist, death of the monster. Protagonist overcomes monster.

2. **Rags to Riches** (*Ugly Duckling, The Light of the Oracle*)
   - Protagonist starts out poor and/or obscure.
   - Protagonist is wretchedly mistreated and scorned.
   - Everything goes wrong for the protagonist.
   - Through self-discovery, the protagonist develops inner strength and confronts what holds him or her back.
   - Fulfillment: The protagonist ends up rich and famous or at least greatly appreciated due to inner qualities that have been developed or revealed.

3. **The Quest** (*Lord of the Rings, Watership Down*)
   - The protagonist hears of treasure or a promised land far away.
   - Protagonist decides to make a journey to gain the treasure or the promised land.
   - Companions are chosen or possibly fated to go along.
   - Long journey for protagonist and companions follows, during which dangers mount.
   - Protagonist and companions find valuable help or advice.
   - Intense ordeal makes treasure or promised land seem impossible to attain.
Tested to the fullest, the protagonist survives, proving worthy.

Success: The protagonist wins the princess/prince and establishes a new kingdom, new world, or new way of life.

4. **Voyage and Return** (*The Secret to Lying, The Wizard of Oz*)
   - Protagonist’s ordinary world is shattered, throwing him or her into a different world.
   - Protagonist explores the new world. Despite wonders, doesn’t feel at home.
   - Shadow appears, bringing hardship and frustration.
   - Shadow almost takes over.
   - Death-defying escape for the protagonist.
   - Protagonist returns home wiser.

5. **Comedy** (*Pride and Prejudice, The Seer and the Sword*)
   This one needs a short intro because we are conditioned to associate the word “comedy” with something funny, even silly. However, in this context, to be funny is not the defining feature of the plotline.
   - One or more characters are trapped in a life situation that’s bleak or frustrating.
   - The true nature of one or more characters is hidden.
   - Lovers are separated by misunderstandings, or families/friends are divided.
   - Characters experience a change of heart.
   - True natures are revealed.
   - Misunderstandings clear up, bringing happiness and union.
   - Lovers/families/friends are united or restored.

6. **Tragedy** (*Romeo and Juliet, Candor*)
   - Protagonist casts about cluelessly and then focuses on something he or she wants.
   - Protagonist commits to action.
   - Things go wrong.
   - Things get worse.
   - Despair sets in.
   - Protagonist is destroyed—by death or other forces.

7. **Rebirth** (*A Christmas Carol, The Hunger Games*)
   - Protagonist falls under oppressive force or threat.
For a while this threat seems to be contained or neutralized.
The threat worsens.
Protagonist experiences a living hell.
The oppressive force seems to triumph.
Something occurs that allows the protagonist to see the light.
Protagonist is redeemed or set free or brought into a better existence.

By examining the steps in each of these plots, you can discover useful clues about structuring your own novel. Which of the seven plots applies to your book? Where does the story begin and end? And what is the central conflict?

conflict

Every teen who has navigated through adolescence into adulthood has known days when conflict seemed overpowering.

Yay!
What?

Well, stories need conflict—like a car needs an engine. When’s the last time you were riveted by a book about a sweet guy who met a darling girl and everything went wonderfully well for them and then got even smoother?

Writing conflict isn’t just about adding a little tension here and there. It’s about a clash of forces or values or personalities, something that escalates and doesn’t go away until it’s finally resolved.

Central Conflict

Your beginning will introduce the central conflict that drives your book. That central conflict will pose a question to the reader. Often, this question will never be stated outright, and yet it will inform every scene.
All of the action taking place in the story will revolve around that central question. For example, the central conflict in *Pride and Prejudice* is implied by the title: Pride and prejudice oppose true love. Readers ask themselves: *Will Darcy and Elizabeth win true love, or will their pride and prejudice keep them apart?*

Subplots each have a conflict as well, a conflict related to the central conflict, that also generates questions in the reader’s mind. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth’s sister Jane is separated from her true love, Charles Bingley, by the conniving deceit of his friends and family members who desire him to marry someone with more elevated social status than Jane possesses. The reader wonders: *Will true love overcome interference, deceit, and social snobbery?* There are numerous subplots in Austen’s masterpiece, but all are related to true love or its lack. If these subplots veered off into a different area of conflict—such as life or death in the face of dire physical danger, confronting the way magical powers can corrupt the human soul, or questioning the ramifications of free will—the novel would become absurd.

The central conflict in *The Hunger Games* is also implied in the title: Cruelty and terrible danger can break the human spirit. Readers ask: *Will Katniss Everdeen be broken?* And there are various subplots asking various questions, all related to the central conflict: *If Katniss survives, what will her survival cost her? Will Peeta continue to love her? Will her sister Primrose be safe?*

**Conflict Seeks Resolution**

Conflict seeks resolution, so characters in conflict are compelled to act. And action fueled by conflict is much more interesting than action with no conflict behind it.

In the cruel lottery of the Hunger Games, Katniss is not chosen: Primrose, her beloved younger sister, is picked. Katniss feels so much pain at the thought of Prim perishing in the games that she volunteers to take her place. Her love for her sister intensifies her hatred for the oppressive regime that forces young people to participate in the games. She must act.
Internal and External Conflict

If you’ve read any writing books, you’ve come across a mention of the differences between internal and external conflict, so I’ll just give them a cursory glance here.

**Internal conflict.** Internal conflict is between the character and himself or herself. Characters may be at odds with their personal past, struggling with faults or addictions, wrestling with contradictory beliefs or ethical dilemmas, grieving a loss, or caught in any powerful emotion.

Elizabeth Bennet filters everything through a prejudice she quickly forms against Mr. Darcy, and he, in turn, looks at life through a lens of personal pride. Their flaws get in the way of their love, and drive them to take actions they regret.

Katniss is gripped by feelings of love and of hate; she longs for peace and also desires vengeance. These emotions are a potent brew that drives her to take extreme risks.

**External conflict.** External conflict is between a character and something or someone outside himself or herself. External antagonists are most often humans but occasionally are animals or fantasy creatures. Antagonists can also take the form of nature—storms, mountains, deserts—or they can be machines. Situational conflicts such as poverty, war, and societal oppression can also oppose a character’s goals and wishes.

Elizabeth Bennet contends with foolish and angry relatives, false friends, and unhelpful parents. She must rise to the occasion or lose out on love. Katniss Everdeen encounters numerous external conflicts during the course of the games, from thirst to fireballs to venomous insects, all of which can be lethal. She must defeat them or die.

**Combine internal and external conflict.** By combining internal and external conflict, you ramp up the tension driving your story. If Elizabeth Bennet had only her own prejudice to deal with, *Pride and Prejudice* would not be such a great book. But Austen layers her story with other problems. If Katniss Everdeen had only external dangers to fight, her story would not be one tenth as captivating. But Collins forces her character to combat panic, self-doubt, and hallucinations, combining internal and external conflict throughout *The Hunger Games.*
Pace Your Conflict

If you give your characters short periods of relief from their struggles, you provide contrast and context. A book that is one long battle would be just as boring as a book showing nothing but peace and joy. Without light, shadows cannot be thrown.

Conflict will be expressed differently depending on where you are in your book. The beginning introduces the central conflict. The middle adds twists and turns with additional complications. The ending resolves the central conflict. (More about middles and ends in Chapter 3.)

Complications

Circumstances conspire to add complications to existing conflict, making it worse. Elizabeth Bennet attends Bingley’s ball, hoping to enjoy herself, but she is pursued by Mr. Collins, the absurdly pretentious cousin who hopes to marry her. Mr. Collins treads on her toes and makes the wrong moves during dancing. Not only that, but her new crush, George Wickham, doesn’t show for the ball, and she blames Mr. Darcy. Complications. Her parents and younger sisters parade their foibles, alarming Darcy so much that he intervenes to separate his friend Bingley from Jane. More complications. Elizabeth’s prejudices are confirmed; Darcy’s pride dictates his actions.

The rules of the Hunger Games require Katniss to fight other “tributes” to the death. One of those tributes is someone from her own district: Peeta the baker’s boy, whom she knows to be a kind-hearted person. How can she kill him? And the territory of the games is unknowable because it constantly changes. These complications add pressure to a situation that’s already unbearable. Will Katniss be broken?

Complications are a big part of novel writing. Believable complications heighten the central conflict and stoke the tension so long as they fit the characters and the plot. If Jane Austen had added a complication from The Hunger Games, such as forcing her protagonist to spend the night in a tree to escape death, that complication would not fit the character or the story being told. If Suzanne Collins had added a complication from Pride and Prejudice, such as a mother who couldn’t open her mouth without being hopelessly silly, that complication wouldn’t fit.
either. Examine the complications in your own novel. Do they fit the characters and the plot? Are there enough of them?

In the section on characters, we’ll address the importance of stakes for each character. Suffice it to say here: Character stakes are crucial to the conflict.

Conflict Must Feel Real

To resonate with your readers, the conflict driving your story must feel actual and real. When you, the writer, truly feel the conflict you’re writing about, it’s easier to communicate it to your readers.

Every adversity, challenge, or hardship you’ve ever faced can help fuel your fiction. It’s all there to be tapped—not only your own conflict, but also what you’ve observed in other people, and the troubles you’ve been told. And if there’s one thing you don’t want to do when writing YA, it’s to skimp on the conflict.

Writing Exercise—Finding Conflict

1. Write something you’ve wanted to say but never said. Don’t hold back—this is for you and you alone. No one else will see it, and after you look at what you’ve written you can shred or delete it.
2. Before shredding or deleting, look at what you’ve written. Ask yourself whether you held back. (Most writers will find that they’ve held back in some way.)
3. If you did hold back, do you know why you did, or for whom?
4. What does this tell you about conflicts you could utilize in your writing?
5. Jot down a few ideas you have for stories. Look at the element of conflict in each. Which idea is the most compelling? Which conflict is the most gripping? See the relationship?

Conflict and Story Arc

In essence, the arc of a story is about the rise of the central conflict, which becomes increasingly intense until it demands resolution. Not
all resolutions are happy and bring about redemption or success for the protagonist. But one way or another, the central conflict is concluded, and the central question is answered. Elizabeth and Darcy find true love. Katniss survives, at great cost.

Conflict in YA

Intertwine the central conflict in your YA novel with the theme of coming-of-age. Naturally, when writing YA, your protagonist will not be a seasoned veteran facing the winter of life. He or she will be a young person encountering the difficulties of growing up.

message

Your message is intimately connected to your central conflict: It arises from your resolution. We’re all familiar with messages that have been beloved by storytellers for centuries: love conquers all, good triumphs over evil, the soul is eternal. What about your book?

Many people use the term “premise” instead of “message.” I like using message because the word doesn’t invite confusion. “Premise” is often used to refer to the underpinnings of a particular world or milieu. By that definition, the premise of The Hunger Games is that North America turns into Panem, a repressive regime where the Capitol feeds off the labor of 12 districts, each of which supply it with different commodities. These underpinnings are not the same as what I mean by a message.

What Is the Message?

The main message I derive from Pride and Prejudice is “True love overcomes pride and prejudice, leading to happy marriage.” And in the centuries since Jane Austen wrote her book, this message has been discussed by many thousands of readers. Some agree with that message, and some do not. Whether readers agree or they don’t, Austen’s message is flawlessly portrayed in her novel.
To me, the main message in *The Hunger Games* is “Courage must fight oppression, whatever the costs—and the costs will be high.”

It’s important to note that the central message in any given novel can be anything the author chooses to make it. The message doesn’t need to hold true for all of the world, but it must hold true for that particular novel. If Elizabeth Bennet had found true love without ever having to confront her prejudice, the message of *Pride and Prejudice* would not have been able to stand. If Katniss Everdeen had been broken, the message in *The Hunger Games* would have changed to become “Even the brave are completely broken by oppression.”

Your Message Is a Unifying Principle

Is it necessary to know your message before you begin writing? No, although the message is such an important unifying principle within your novel that if you know what it is while you’re writing, you’re likely to save yourself some time. And when you self-edit, you definitely want to know it.

Scenes that do not support your message do not belong in your book. This bears repeating: *Scenes that do not support your message do not belong in your book.* By support, I mean that when the scene is broken down, it is related to the central question posed by the conflict, and it serves to build toward the conclusion. If even one scene veers off course from the message, your novel will be weakened.

Subplot Messages

Can there be more than one message in your book? Yes and no. The main message will give rise to others, and these will be found in subplots. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth’s friend Charlotte enters a loveless marriage. The irritations of her situation only highlight the happiness of the couples who find true love. The message of Charlotte’s subplot, “Marriage without true love cannot lead to happiness,” is closely related to the main message. In another subplot, Elizabeth’s flighty and conceited younger sister, Lydia, gets married, but her husband is a worthless con artist who is apparently incapable of true love. This subplot says “With-
out true love, pride and prejudice are not overcome,” bringing us back to the main message by being its mirror image.

Themes

The subject of themes can be confusing, because people often use the word “theme” interchangeably with “message” and with “premise.” This is understandable, because such usage is consistent with dictionary.com’s definition of theme—“a unifying or dominant idea, motif, etc., as in a work of art.” However, I would like to define theme a little differently when discussing novel writing, as “a feature that runs through a novel.”

In *Pride and Prejudice*, family is a prominent theme. Family relationships are portrayed as a very mixed bag. Both Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy have relatives who epitomize obnoxiousness, although in different ways. The antics of these people provide high entertainment value along with escalating complications. But the good points of family are not overlooked: Elizabeth experiences the full blessings of family in her sister Jane and her Aunt Gardiner, while Darcy dotes on his sister Georgiana. Another theme is the repeated appearance of characters who think far too well of themselves, such as Lydia, Mr. Wickham, Mr. Collins, and Lady Catherine. And of course, the theme of marriage itself is found in many guises in Austen’s novel: Marriage relationships range from miserably incompatible to delightfully harmonious. Without these themes, the message of true love could still hold, but Austen chose themes of family, ridiculous conceit, and marriage to tell her story.

*The Hunger Games* relies on themes of friendship and alliance. Katniss forges friendships with people who become her allies, from her friend Gale back in District 12, to her stylist in the Capitol, to her drunken mentor Haymitch, to other contestants in the Games. Katniss could have fought alone and the novel could still have retained its main message, but Suzanne Collins chose themes of friendship and alliance to advance her story.

Both novels are also infused with the overarching theme so important to the YA genre: coming of age. Loss of innocence and growing maturity create context for all of the actions taken by the main characters and some of the secondary characters as well.
To summarize: Themes are woven throughout a novel, but they are not the same as its message. They are features. And when you choose the features for your own book, pick a few and play them up. Too many themes will make the reader feel disoriented, but a few clear and consistent themes create a believable sense of continuity and help with characterization.

Edit Your Content

Scenes or themes that are alien to the basic message in a novel do not create interesting complexity: They merely clutter the meaning and reduce its impact on the reader. So as you self-edit, check to be sure each scene supports the main message and that the themes you have chosen fit your novel and your genre. Then give those themes continuous play.

setting

The setting is the environment where your story takes place. It “sets” the tone. Katniss travels from place to place in *The Hunger Games*: She starts out in District 12, and then moves onto the train for the Capitol. Once she reaches the Capitol, she resides in the luxurious quarters for tributes, where she is fluffed and buffed by her style team as well as spending time in the training center. When she gets to the arena for the games, more settings come into play: the lake and cornucopia, the forest, specific trees, a pool, stream, and cave. Each setting contains separate scenes; each contributes to the mood and action happening in those scenes.

Elizabeth Bennet experiences various locales in *Pride and Prejudice* and these varieties of setting help move the plot, but by today’s standards, Austen’s descriptions of setting are rather limited because they lack sensory details.

Physical settings have an emotional impact that can greatly enhance your story. Imagine yourself, right now, sitting on the edge of the Grand Canyon while reading this paragraph. Then imagine that you’re sitting at
a sidewalk café in Paris. Notice the change in feeling? As you pick your settings, maximize the ability of place to create mood.

Watch for Clichés

When writing your first draft, you may have thrown your characters into settings that were a bit humdrum and cliché. Maybe you overused a coffee shop for scenes where a friendship develops or a school hallway for telling secrets. I’m not saying there’s no place for coffee shops or school hallways—especially in contemporary YA novels. But if you can come up with unique settings, your story will thank you. A friendship developed during the hustle and bustle of a tournament, or a deep secret exchanged in a stadium, will be more intriguing because the action is unexpected for the setting. A fight in a coffee shop would also be interesting, for the same reason—because a coffee shop conjures a feeling of warmth and conversation among friends.

Describe Settings Through the Senses

To make the most of your settings, describe them through the senses. This doesn’t mean going on and on: A scattering of sentences every few pages is usually plenty in a YA novel: More than that, and you’ll slow the pace too much. But vision, hearing, touch, taste, and smell each offer something to bring readers right into the story you’re telling. Most of us tend to focus on one or two senses and forget about the rest. Personally, I often forget smell and taste, and I have to remind myself to sprinkle some of those details in later.

Author Laura Resau incorporates four senses to describe the Plaza de Ponchos, a Guatemalan marketplace, in this excerpt from her 2009 YA novel, *The Indigo Notebook*:

I weave through the tunnels of stalls that smell of wool fresh off llamas and sheep and alpaca, an earthy animal smell mixing with the exhaust of passing cars. Tourists are chatting with vendors, reaching out to test the itchiness level of a poncho. Or holding up a brown sweater beside a gray sweater to decide which color
looks best. Meanwhile, the vendors are cajoling in singsong voices, a mix of Spanish and heavily accented English. (p. 18)

By mixing scents, textures, voices, and colors, Resau quickly conveys a vivid sense of place.

Use Setting to Reveal Character Emotion and Perspective

The way characters view items in a setting is a great way to offer insight into their emotions, adding dimension to characters’ personalities for the reader. Here’s a description of a portfolio by the viewpoint character, Catherine de’ Medici, in Carolyn Meyer’s (2007) historical novel, Duchessina:

On a high shelf reached by a ladder, I discovered a portfolio containing a number of drawings of an elephant; some were in red chalk on gray paper, others were pen and ink sketches on parchment. According to notes in the portfolio, the elephant, named Hanno, had been a gift from the king of Portugal to Leo. Pope Leo had kept Hanno in an enclosure within the Vatican walls. I felt I had something in common with Hanno—the poor elephant must have been lonely, too. (p. 145)

Time

Setting is not just about place—it’s also about time. To orient your reader, make it plain how time is unfolding. Is it morning, afternoon, evening? What is the time of year? How many days have passed since Lydia ran off with Wickham? How long has it been since another tribute was killed in the Hunger Games arena? Don’t make your readers guess.

If it’s night and your characters are outside, remember to account for the darkness when describing visual objects. If you’ve just finished detailing an overpowering odor of rotten fish, don’t immediately have your protagonist pick up a whiff of something subtle such as saffron (unless he or she has special doglike abilities). If 10 car alarms are rup-
turing the air, don’t ask your characters to carry on a conversation in whispers at the same time. You get the idea.

**Flashbacks.** A flashback acquaints the reader with a previous time in a novel’s fictional world, a time before page 1 that explains something crucial about the present. Memories will naturally arise in the minds of characters, and that’s fine if those memories contribute something of value to the story, especially if they’re confined to the occasional sentence or two. Full scenes in flashback mode are sometimes necessary too, if they explain a key plot point. But flashbacks slow your pace, so keep your characters in the present as much as possible; use flashbacks sparingly, and when you do, trim them as much as you can.

Here’s a line of flashback from my romantic fantasy, *The Seer and the Sword* (Hanley, 2000). It was originally a longer memory, but I trimmed it into one line in a sentence: “Landen consciously slowed his breathing as he approached Emid, reminding himself what his father had taught him: *The moment is vast*” (p. 30).

**Era.** Time also adds the crucial concept of era, another aspect of setting. The era in which your book happens will shape your characters and have a big influence on the actions they take.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the social and moral views of 19th-century England provide texture for the plot. Charlotte marries Mr. Collins—a man she must exert herself to tolerate—simply to avoid being a lifelong spinster dependent on family members. Sixteen-year-old Lydia’s actions reflect directly on all of her family members—and she does not get a second chance to find true love. “The poor” are referred to as a collective unit rather than individual people with lives, while being rich is a striking qualification for seeking a wife. Social status and social protocol regulate the possibilities of almost every situation.

The era of *The Hunger Games* is a sharply divided futuristic society. In the districts, conditions are primitive for residents, most of whom do without luxuries of any sort and eke out a precarious existence only by being strong, cunning, and hardworking. Starvation is commonplace, and so are lethal injuries. But in the Capitol, high levels of technology are utilized by the citizens, who are well-fed and steeped in luxury. These people are also conditioned to view the Hunger Games, a brutal and deathly competition that takes place every year, as sheer entertainment, something to place bets on, a pageant to either heckle or applaud.
The era of your story has many components. How do your characters dress? What sorts of dwellings do they have? What is the climate—not only the weather, but also the social climate? How important is social hierarchy, and where do your characters fit within that hierarchy? What has taken place in recent history? What about ancient history—how is it perceived?

Even if ancient history is mentioned only once in your novel—or never mentioned—it’s still important for you, the author, to know about it, because it has played a role in creating the culture that surrounds your characters.

Culture

Speaking of culture, which values are embedded in your story’s civilization? What do people cherish and revile? How are young people treated, and what is their traditional place in society? How much education do your characters have? How do people talk?

dialogue

Characters reveal themselves through the actions they take and the words they speak. Used well, dialogue is your best shot at showing character relationships and personalities and providing context for character actions.

Jane Austen’s gift for writing dialogue is a big part of why her stories capture the hearts of readers—and filmmakers—even after centuries have passed. Although she wrote her books 200 or more years ago, we can still learn from her. One of the many things she did right was to give Elizabeth Bennet an extra helping of spunk. This excerpt from early in *Pride and Prejudice* showcases Lizzy’s spirit. Her mother has been talking about Jane Bennet’s beauty and how when Jane was 15 a gentleman wrote her some verses:

“And so ended his affection,” said Elizabeth, impatiently. “There has been many a one, I fancy, overcome in the same way. I won-
der who first discovered the efficacy of poetry in driving away love!"

“I have been used to consider poetry as the food of love,” said Darcy.

“Of a fine, stout, healthy love it may. Everything nourishes what is strong already. But if it be only a slight, thin sort of inclination, I am convinced that one good sonnet will starve it entirely away.” (pp. 57–58)

When Elizabeth talks, readers want more. What about you? Have you given your characters extra-large personalities? What do they reveal about themselves in what they say?

Era Matters in Dialogue

Of course, contemporary teens would be unlikely to use words like “efficacy” unless they were diehard Jane Austen fans. But it’s a mistake to think that every modern young person will use only a limited vocabulary. I’ve met plenty of teens who love words and bemoan the banal scripts expected of them. The trick to getting teens to sound like teens is not to limit their vocabulary but to get them to speak in their own voices, saying things that ring true for their characters and era.

In Todd Mitchell’s contemporary YA novel, The Secret to Lying (2010), the characters are attending a school for the academically gifted:

“Put a cream puff up your butt,” Heinous sang, catching up to us. His most recent shtick involved making up lyrics to Eddie Murphy’s classic, “Boogie in Your Butt.”

“Put numchucks up your butt. Put a fluffy duck up your butt. Put an Oompa-Loompa up your butt.”

“The humor in this particular saying,” Dickie replied, mocking the way Mr. Funt, the sophomore class English teacher spoke, “being that, technically speaking, an Oompa-Loompa would not fit up one’s buttocks, not to mention the fact that Willy Wonka would never permit such egregious treatment of his workers. Thus, the ridiculousness of the claim, which leads to laughter.” (p. 33)
The tone of this exchange is modern; when read aloud it’s easy to believe that teenagers are talking. And the subtext tells readers that Heinous and Dickie are intelligent and creative, and also that they’re adolescent boys who are trying to make up for being bored. It’s so much more effective to communicate this by giving the characters genuine voices of their own than it would be through narration. That’s the beauty of dialogue.

More About Subtext

Subtext in dialogue can communicate volumes to a reader. Let’s examine a short passage from *The Hunger Games*. Katniss is about to leave for the Capitol, and this is her good-bye conversation with her best friend, Gale.

“Katniss, it’s just hunting. You’re the best hunter I know,” says Gale.

“It’s not just hunting. They’re armed. They think,” I say.

“So do you. And you’ve had more practice. Real practice,” he says. “You know how to kill.”

“Not people,” I say.

“How different can it be, really?” says Gale grimly. (p. 40)

If that particular section of dialogue had been written with the subtext out in the open, it would have been much less interesting:

“Katniss, I’ve seen you hunt, and you’re a great hunter. You have a chance to succeed if you can get your head around killing people.”

“Gale, because you’re my hunting partner and I trust you, I can tell you what I won’t tell anyone else: I’m afraid of going up against people who are armed and trying to kill me, people who could outthink my strategies.”

“What matters now is that you know how to kill.”

“I don’t want to kill people.”

“The idea of killing people doesn’t bother me, and it shouldn’t bother you, either.”
Isn’t it appalling how dense and stilted dialogue becomes when subtext is brought to the surface? The only thing worse would be if the meaning in the subtext were converted into narrative prose, as in this hypothetical example: Gale knew that Katniss was a great hunter. He thought she had a chance to succeed in the Hunger Games if she could only get her head around the idea of killing people. After all, she’d killed many animals. But Katniss was afraid of going up against people who were armed and trying to kill her, people capable of anticipating her hunting strategies.

Gah! See what I mean? This might work for a first draft that was written just for the writer. But if all of the subtext in a novel is brought out and explained, the book quickly loses texture and interest.

Check your dialogue for subtext. If you don’t find any, chances are good that your dialogue exchanges are too lengthy and transparent. Look for ways to be more oblique, and trim what you can. Often, less is more. Distill your words. Ask each word of dialogue two questions: Are you believable? Are you necessary? If you don’t get a yes to both answers, change your approach.

Dialogue Sets Up Action

In this excerpt from Joan Bauer’s (2008) humorous contemporary YA, Peeled, the dialogue sets up the action that will take place in the next scene:

“Hildy’s not afraid,” Lev assured him.
“That’s touching, Radner. You go with her.”
“The thing is,” Lev muttered, “I . . . ”
“I’ll go,” Zack said quietly.
Baker looked at me with something close to confidence.
“Show him how we play the game here.”
“Ohkay.” I waited for more detail on how we play the game.
There wasn’t any.
I guess we were making it up as we went along. (pp. 162–163)
Dialogue Mixed With Action

When dialogue is mixed with action, it drives the plot forward like nothing else, as in Amy Kathleen Ryan’s (2011) sci-fi YA, Glow. This excerpt is from the point of view of Waverly, the female protagonist:

She tried to make sense of it: Men holding guns in a room full of children. A part of her considered that she ought to feel afraid.

“Don’t worry,” the man with the scar said. “This is a rescue mission.”

“Then why do you need that?” Waverly pointed at the gun.

“In case something goes wrong,” he said in a lilting way, as though he were talking to a girl much younger than Waverly.

“What would go wrong?” she asked.

His smile was thin. “I’m glad we understand each other.”

He jerked his gun at her, gesturing for her to enter the room. The way he turned his back on her showed that he did not expect, would not tolerate, disobedience.

Her breath laboring, she looked down at Serafina, took hold of her small sweaty hand, and obeyed. (p. 29)

Ryan has created an unbearable feeling of menace by combining dialogue and action.

Slang

To slang or not to slang? Well, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, slang terms rise and fall. Some move in and out so fast that between the time you write your book and get it published, a favorite word will have left the building. If you’re writing historical fiction, you have an easy out because you can research what used to be said in the period when your novel takes place. If your story is held in the future, you can make up whatever words you like and give them any cachet you wish—or take existing words and give them an added slang meaning. Here’s an example from M.T. Anderson’s (2002) dystopian satire, Feed:

I was like trying to sleep for the last few minutes of the flight because there was nothing to see except broken things in space,
and when we’re going hard I get real sleepy real easy, and I didn’t want to be null for the unettes on the moon, at the hotel, if any of them were youch. (p. 5)

Anderson’s placement of null gives it a slangy slant, while unettes and youch add credibility to the future he created.

Whether you’re writing sci-fi, fantasy, or a contemporary novel, you can come up with slang that belongs to your particular group of characters.

**Internal Dialogue**

Especially when writing in third person, internal dialogue can be a useful tool to reveal a character’s thoughts. The format for internal dialogue in prose is italics without quotation marks, as in this example from Donita K. Paul’s (2004) YA Christian fantasy, *Dragonspell*:

Kale closed her eyes against the sight, hoping to protect her stomach. The repulsive smell of the grawligs could not be shut out so easily. To distract herself, she searched her memory for tales of the mountain ogres.

*What’s true and what’s fable?*

*In the stories, they eat anything they catch. Lucky for me, it looks like they prefer roasted venison to roasted o’rant.* (p. 7)

You’ll notice that internal dialogue is written in present tense, just like spoken dialogue.

**Graphic Novels Rely on Both External and Internal Dialogue**

Dialogue, both internal and external, carries a large share of the story in graphic novels, as in the image from *Freshman: Tales of 9th Grade Obsessions, Revelations, and Other Nonsense* by Corinne Mucha (2011), shown on page 54.
OK, guys! Welcome. Wherever you’re seated now will be your seat for the rest of the year.

So, if you want to move, do it now.

Why isn’t she moving?

What a bitch.

10 years of friendship and she acts like she doesn’t know me?

This sucks.

I never should have shared my juice box with her when we were kids.

Give Each Character a Distinct Voice

Not only do you want characters to communicate who they are when they talk, but also to communicate a distinct voice. If all of the characters in a novel talk in a similar way, they begin to run together and you miss out on the outstanding opportunity dialogue provides for separating character natures, motives, and goals.

goals and motivations

A discussion of all of the elements that go into fictional characters could fill pages and pages. Because space is limited and there's so much to cover, I’m going to narrow the focus to the way conflict plays into your characters' goals, motivation, and stakes.

The difference between goals and motivations gives stories interesting depth. Most often, goals are stated and motives are hidden; goals are direct and motives are indirect. And yet motives frequently provide as much or more drive than goals.

When Katniss Everdeen enters the arena of the Hunger Games, her goal is to get hold of a bow and survive. Survival implies killing, and Katniss talks tough. But her hidden motive is to love and be loved. Love leads her to volunteer for the games. Love drives her to befriend Rue, the young contestant who reminds her of her sister, Prim. Love pushes her to help Peeta when he's wounded, even though doing so will slow her down. Her goals are in opposition to her motives, and the internal pressure this creates feeds into the central conflict. Because she won't acknowledge her own motives, Katniss comes across as clueless and blind in her interpretations of Peeta. To the reader, it's obvious he loves her, but Katniss insists on telling herself he's just acting a part.

Characters tend to be aware of their goals and unaware of their motives until the time is right within the story for those motives to become conscious. By including contrasting goals and motives, you give readers extra satisfaction. Take a moment to consider your own favorite YA books. What are the goals and motives driving the characters? How
do those goals and motives oppose each other, and how do they relate to the central conflict?

Stakes

Simply put, stakes are all about what a character has to lose. Goals, motives, and situations are all put into the mix when stakes are considered. The more there is to lose, the more the stakes go up. The higher the stakes, the more potential there is for excitement. But just putting someone’s life at risk doesn’t guarantee a story full of interesting tension. Compelling tension is created by weaving together the central conflict, goals, and motives, and then raising the stakes in consonance with the main message.

The stakes for Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* are nothing less than true love and happiness. Jane Austen doesn’t just toss out this concept casually. She clearly demonstrates that marriage without love is a miserable state. And through dialogue and action, she allows readers to get to know Elizabeth Bennet and care about her. She also manages to make Mr. Darcy very appealing despite his pride. Readers want these two to get together!

For Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*, the stakes start with physical survival and then escalate to include the possibility of mental and emotional breakdown. Suzanne Collins doesn’t just tell readers to worry about Katniss, she puts her protagonist in one dire circumstance after another. Nor does she confine the hazards Katniss must face to physical challenges; she adds mind-bending venom and heart-wrenching situations, all of which are tailored to aggravate the central conflict.

Character Arc

The term “character arc” just means that characters grow and change. Motivation, goals, and stakes drive characters to take actions that result in a slew of experiences. Characters respond to these experiences. The result is growth and change.

Some characters change very little through the course of a novel, and that in itself says something about them. Others go through rapid and profound changes. Whatever happens, finding out who does what and how and why is part of what keeps readers engaged.
Chapter 11

Interviews With YA Authors

Sure, it’s simple, writing for kids . . . just as simple as bringing them up.

—Ursula K. LeGuin
On the following pages are interviews with authors of young adult fiction and nonfiction who are writing and publishing today. They answer questions about what's involved with subgenres, dealing with rejection, and various approaches to finishing a book. Then they delve into the rewards of being a writer. Please note that each author's profile only includes a selection of his or her works. For more, please visit the websites provided.

**Fiction Authors**
- M.T. Anderson ..................203
- Pam Bachorz .......................206
- T. A. Barron ......................208
- Joan Bauer .......................211
- Hilari Bell .........................213
- Dia Calhoun ......................216
- Chris Crutcher ...................218
- Nancy Garden ....................220
- Emmanuel Guibert ..............223
- Patrick Jones .....................224
- Laurie R. King ...................226
- David Lubar ......................228
- Barry Lyga .........................230
- Carolyn Meyer ...................233
- Todd Mitchell .....................235
- Corinne Mucha ....................237
- Lauren Myracle ...................239
- Donita K. Paul ....................241
- Stephanie Perkins .................244
- Laura Resau .......................246
- Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich ....249
- Amy Kathleen Ryan ...............251
- Lynda Sandoval ...................253
- Denise Vega ........................256
- Allen Zadoff ......................259

**Nonfiction Authors**
- Christine Fonseca ..............262
- Zachary Hamby ...................265
- Sean McCollum ...................268
- Josh Neufeld ......................272
- Megan Nicolay ...................274
- Janet Price .........................277
- Cheryl Miller Thurston ..........280
- Sari Wilson .......................283
Your books are so original, they’re not easy to categorize. *Feed* is a futuristic dystopian satire that raises social issues even more relevant today than when you first wrote it. Your *Octavian Nothing* series is written in a completely different style and uses historical fiction to explore the human condition. I’m guessing that your books reach as many adults as teens. Did you have any idea when you began these books that they’d be so effective at opening discussions among readers?

I certainly hoped that would be the case! I try to write about issues that fire me up. In many ways, it’s my anger or unhappiness about a thing that makes me want to write about it.

Success for writers is often hit or miss. Are you surprised by your success? Has being labeled controversial helped you reach more readers?

I am absolutely surprised by my success. I write for the kids who are like me and my friends were: the nerds, the kids who are often marginalized or too shy to speak. (I wasn’t too shy to speak . . . In fact, I’d say I was too shy to STOP talking.) So I write for a small (but passionate!) audience. I never anticipated that the books would have a wider audience, and I have to admit, I’m delighted.
How many rejections have you received in the course of your writing career? How did you deal with being rejected?

I’ve dealt with many! It’s important just to soldier on. For one thing, it makes sense to be working on one thing while submitting something else, rather than just sitting back and waiting. That way you have a little more momentum to get past the rejections when they come in. You can always tell yourself, “What I’m writing now is so much better than that old thing!” (It helps.) But also, don’t forget that many writers get many, many rejections before getting published—and then the same books become perennial favorites of thousands of people.

What’s your approach to finishing a book?

Even in the cases where I don’t know the intricacies of a plot before I set out to write, I do know the key scenes, and I write toward them. I strain toward them.

But sometimes it can be tough to keep going! One thing I do is sometimes switch off between projects, writing something very different. For example, while writing my very dark Gothic historical novels (the Octavian Nothing books), I took vacation breaks and wrote light little middle-grade novels (my Pals in Peril series), which were as wacky as I could make it. Switching off between these projects really helped to restore me. As my editor says, “A change is as good as a rest.”

Those breaks to switch off between projects also allow me to go back to a project after a month or so with a new perspective. Problems that seemed insoluble when I was in the midst of them, knee deep in construction, don’t seem too intractable anymore.

What’s the most important thing you’ve learned as a writer?

Ramen recipes.

Oh. You mean, writing related, not income related? I would say that the one dictum I’ve learned that sums up a lot of the hard lessons of writing is this one: The plot should embody the theme and the conflict. The theme and the conflict should arise out of the plot. That is to say, whatever the abstract emotions you want to have come out of your book, they must be concretized in actions . . . You need to have characters who are really going to play these things out. Having fake people sit around and feel a certain way is never as powerful as having them act a
certain way and having their lives materially changed *because* they feel a certain way.

**What is most rewarding to you about writing?**

I love the moment of writing. Being in the zone, and sitting there typing away furiously, and pacing around, and sitting down again and writing more . . . being completely wrapped up in it in the moment. Then you look up, and hours have passed. And then you look down, and you’ve written complete garbage. But something will come out of it! And more importantly, the experience of working out your thoughts and ideas and dreams is, in itself, pleasurable, liberating.

**What’s your best advice for people who want to write for teens?**

It’s a tougher racket than it appears right now! I guess my hope for beginning writers (which is not precisely advice) is that they’ll pay attention to their language, to the way they tell their stories, and that they’ll do something truly different and truly astonishing to make the rest of us sit up. The teen market is glutted—glutted—wit copycat fiction of all breeds. That’s where a lot of beginners want to head. But what we need is something new, something transformative. So ask yourself, what are your eccentricities? How can you lean into them? How can you serve them up to us in a way that will dazzle us with the unexpected? I get excited just thinking about the personalities I don’t know yet who I’ll be introduced to through their books. Good luck!
Please say a few words about the YA subgenre in which you write.

I write realistic fiction, mostly about teenagers. The challenges are exactly the same as writing realistic fiction about people of any age. I don’t have to make the reader believe what I write happened, but I have to make them believe it could have. If I cared about being censored, a special problem would be writing about issues or in a language that doesn’t offend people, but I don’t, so it doesn’t. The biggest challenge in writing realistic fiction is making it real.

How many rejections have you received in the course of your writing career? How did you deal with being rejected?

If I remember correctly, I got rejected by Reader’s Digest one time and then once with an earlier version of Running Loose before I got serious. I was very lucky to find an agent with the next version, and she had one or two rejections before she sold it and was conscious enough of my delicate sensibilities not to tell me about either of them until after she’d made a deal. I was very lucky getting my material into the hands of the right people.

What’s your approach to finishing a book?

Hurry. By the time I’m close to finishing it, I just want to get it done. I write very fast and then go back and slow down and add whatever else I need.
What’s the most important thing you’ve learned as a writer?

I wouldn’t begin to know how to answer that. The most important things I’ve learned as a human came with what I do, not what I write about. Writing is just getting down my version of what I see.

What is most rewarding to you about writing?

Truthfully, probably the advances and the royalty checks. It’s a tremendously freeing thing to be able to make a living at something I love. But just behind that, it’s the responses from readers and the idea that I may have added some small piece to the huge volume of American literature.

What’s your best advice for people who want to write for teens?

Know your subject. Respect your subject. Don’t preach to them. Tell the truth as you know it and let it fall where it falls.
Please say a few words about the YA subgenre in which you write.

I write straight up contemporary fiction. Kind of. (Nothing in this field is totally straight up, I guess!) I write about girls and their daily lives and concerns, mainly. Sometimes it’s hard, because the grown-up “gatekeepers” (teachers, librarians, parents) have a different take on what’s appropriate to write about (and think about) than I do. But being fearless—and at the same time principled, of course, according to your own principles—just comes with the territory.

How many rejections have you received in the course of your writing career? How did you deal with being rejected?

Okay, um, ready? One hundred fifty-two rejections. You heard it right, baby. One hundred fifty-two rejections before I got my first novel accepted! At first each rejection devastated me, and I would fling myself on the couch and mope and feel sorry for myself. And then I got tough and realized that I could either quit, and guarantee that I’d never get published, or keep on struggling. I kept on struggling.

What’s your approach to finishing a book?

Butt in chair. Just do it.

What’s the most important thing you’ve learned as a writer?

To let my brain be open to possibilities—and to be willing to hurt my characters. Sounds awful, doesn’t it? I don’t mean I’m going to whack ‘em over the head with a plank (though I might). I just means that I’ve finally learned that keeping my characters safe doesn’t make for a good story. I’ve got to allow them to be hurt emotionally, so that they can grow.
What is most rewarding to you about writing?

Well, I do love the rush of having my brain engaged, once I get past the dragging of feet and doing of laundry that sometimes gets in the way. Other than that, I love having girls read my stuff and tell me that it meant something to them.

What’s your best advice for people who want to write for teens?

Read books for teens! Seriously. Sounds like a no-brainer, but so many people I’ve met who say they want to write for teens aren’t actually familiar with the (Awesome! Fabulous! Not dumbed-down!) genre.
Amy Kathleen Ryan
http://www.amykathleenryan.com

Published Books:
Vibes; Zen and Xander Undone; The Sky Chasers series (Glow)

**What drew you to write YA sci fi?**
I like how science fiction is about big ideas. The science fiction I enjoy deals with how historical forces impact the individual in a society. I think stories like this reveal a lot about human nature.

**What’s it like to get a large advance for your work?**
Oh, it’s nice. I’m not going to lie. I’m not rich, not by a long shot, but I make a comfortable living as a writer, and it’s very gratifying. A large advance also brings some pressure along with it. The first thing that happens after you agree to the sum: Your agent publishes an announcement in *Publishers Weekly* that trumpets how you just got a wad of cash. So people come out of the woodwork to congratulate you on your big fat raise. That can feel a little uncomfortable, if you’re the sort who doesn’t like to talk about money. Also, if your publisher asks you to do something, you do it, because they have a lot riding on your work, and you owe them your loyalty. I’m not talking about compromising your integrity; I’m talking about traveling to places you don’t want to go and giving talks you don’t want to give. And of course, I am always a little nervous that the book that got such a large advance will end up not performing like everyone thought it would. But that is always something I worry about. I do notice that the more I get paid for a book, the harder my publisher tries to sell it. Simple economics. As far as I can tell, a large advance can only be good for your career.
How many rejections have you received in the course of your writing career? How did you deal with being rejected?

I have received countless rejections. Every book I’ve sold has been rejected multiple times. I tried not to let this get me down, because if you want to be a writer, you have to accept that rejection is part of your job. You’ll be rejected by agents and publishing houses; then when you’re published, you’ll sometimes be rejected by reviewers, bloggers, and readers in general. If you let rejection get you down for too long, you won’t want to write, and your work will suffer.

What’s your approach to finishing a book?

Short answer: I work on it, very, very, very hard, for a long, long time. Long answer: You finish a book several times over. First you finish a draft, then you finish your first revision, and your second, and you go on revising until the book satisfies your own high standards. Then you send it to your agent and you finish a rewrite for her. Then she sends it to your editor, and you finish another rewrite for her. Then your editor sends your book to a copy editor, and you finish going over those changes. Then you get the galleys and you finish reading through and correcting those. You finish a book so many times that ultimately, it never feels finished, because it’s never really perfect.

What’s the most important thing you’ve learned as a writer?

There is no substitute for hard work. You can be the most talented writer alive, but if you’re not willing to work very hard, your talent means nothing. The only thing that matters is the finished product.

What is most rewarding to you about writing?

Probably every writer says this: I love hearing from readers who enjoyed what I wrote enough to bother writing me an e-mail to tell me so. Also, I absolutely love getting good reviews.

What’s your best advice for people who want to write for teens?

Don’t think of them as “teens.” Think of them as adults who don’t like to be bored with a bunch of wordy prose. That’s how they think of themselves.
Victoria Hanley loves to nurture emerging writers. She is the award-winning author of the bestselling book *Seize the Story: A Handbook for Teens Who Like to Write*. She is also a YA novelist published in 13 languages. Her books have received awards and honors in the U.S. and abroad, including the International Reading Association Young Adults’ Choices, the Colorado Book Award, Kallbacher-Klapperschlange Award (Germany), Colorado Authors League Top Hand Award, Publishers West Silver Award, and New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age. Her work has also been placed on state award lists in Texas, Oklahoma, Utah, and Colorado and has earned a Carnegie Medal nomination in the United Kingdom. Victoria is an active speaker and workshop leader and the recipient of the Colorado Broadcasters Association Award for Best Regularly Scheduled Feature. She has been a featured speaker for the Young Adult Literature Conference, the Colorado Chapter of the International Reading Association, the High Plains Library Association, the Rocky Mountain chapter of the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators, Colorado Association of Libraries, Pikes Peak Writers Conference, Rock Solid Writers Conference, Big Sur in the Rockies, and Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers. She has been published in the *ALAN Review* and has also led workshops for thousands of teens at libraries and schools across the mountains and plains region.

Growing up, Victoria lived in California, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, New Mexico, and Oregon. She now lives with her family in Colorado at the foothills of the Rockies.

You can visit her online at http://www.victoriahanley.com.
What do you need to know to break into the flourishing young adult (YA) market? With humor and a solid grounding in reality, author Victoria Hanley helps readers understand the ins and outs of the YA genre, how to stay inspired, and how to avoid common mistakes writers make in trying to reach teens. The book includes:

- unique writing exercises to help readers find their own authentic teen voice;
- dozens of interviews with YA authors, blogging experts, editors, and agents to give inspiration and guidance for getting published;
- writing exercises and self-editing techniques tailored to YA; and
- encouraging words on dealing with self-doubt, rejection, and lack of time.

“An indispensable reference for the aspiring writer of young adult literature. Well written, well organized, and concise, it presents everything one might learn in a class on writing for young adults.”
—Amy Kathleen Ryan, author of The Sky Chasers series

Victoria Hanley loves to nurture emerging writers. She is a YA novelist published in 13 languages, and her books for teens have received awards and honors in the U.S. and abroad, including the International Reading Association Young Adults’ Choices list, the Colorado Book Award, the Kallbacher-Klapperschlange Award (Germany), Colorado Authors League Top Hand Award, Publishers West Silver Award, and New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age. Her work has also been placed on state award lists in Texas, Oklahoma, Utah, and Colorado and has earned a Carnegie Medal nomination in the United Kingdom.