

Writing Beyond The Novel

When I pitched this class to Mr. S, he referred to all the things I wanted to talk about as “writing chores” which made me laugh, because it really is true. Nobody becomes a novelist, because they really want to write pitch sentences or synopses.

Even if you never grow to love them, learning how to do them well, appreciate them, maybe even enjoy aspects of it will go a long way into making your career more enjoyable.

Hooks:

We have several kinds of hooks that we use in the industry. There are the epic kind that looks good on movie posters, like:

The Hunger Games: Winning means fame and fortune. Losing means certain death.

Divergent: One choice can transform you.

Incarceron: This prison is alive.

These are useful for inciting curiosity, but not really for selling your book to an agent or editor.

We have hooks that we use to convey the concept of our story:

Twilight: Romeo and Juliet, but with vampires

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies

The Lost Girl of Astor Street: *Veronica Mars* set in the 1920s

These are helpful and have their place, even when it comes to selling. But these two varieties are introductory type hooks.

What we'll focus mostly on are the ultra short book description type

of hooks. These get used in a variety of ways. First, you'll use it when you're describing your book to others, whether at a signing or family reunion. Because obviously you need more than one of those epic type hooks. If someone says, "Hey, Katie, what's your book about?" You don't want to just say, "The prison is alive," even though that looks pretty sweet on a book cover.

Let's work on hooks and what makes a good one land

Short

Emotional

Genre-specific

Incites curiosity

Here's the formula that I use to get myself started:

1. Inciting incident
2. Character + adjective
3. The hero's (primal) story goal
4. What's at stake

The sentence might look something like this:

When _____1_____ happens to _____2_____ he must _____3_____ before _____4_____ happens.

Or this:

A(n) _____2_____ does/experiences _____1_____ and must _____3_____ before _____4_____ happens.

Again, this is just a starting point. I like to add my storyworld since I write historical. So for *The Lost Girl of Astor Street*, my starting point would be:

In Jazz age Chicago, a spirited teenage girl's best friend goes missing,

and she must find her before it's too late.

That's boring, but it helps identify the core of the story. I rework it and write option after option, until I finally land on this:

When her best friend is abducted during the summer of 1924, seventeen-year-old Piper Sail hunts for answers amidst the corruption that strangles Chicago, but she has to decide just how much she's willing to sacrifice for the truth when her amateur sleuthing skills lead her back to her own front door.

This is great when written, but I also need to be able to speak it. So if someone asks me what *The Lost Girl of Astor Street* is about, I'm not going to spit this thing out. Instead, I'll say, "It's like *Veronica Mars* but set in the 1920s. My main character lives in an affluent Chicago neighborhood, and when her best friend goes missing, she's determined to find her. But her poking around the secret lives of her neighbors puts her in a dangerous situation."

And then I make myself stop talking. That's the hardest part sometimes.

I used to wait to write these until I couldn't put it off any longer. Now I write them early on when I'm brainstorming.

From this, I develop my backcover copy.

Backcover copy needs to contain these things:

Character – Who is this story about? Who is the main character?

Setting – Where and when does it take place?

Conflict – What are they trying to achieve? Why are they on this journey?

Action – How do they go about doing this?

Mood – Is this book serious? Funny? Intriguing? Dark?

Uniqueness – Why is this book different? Why should I invest the

time in reading it?

Mystery – Often phrased in a question at the end, this is the part of the back cover copy that triggers and “itch” in the reader’s brain, that makes them “scratch” by starting to read.

And you need to do it as concisely as possible. But how do you boil your huge, beautiful masterpiece into just 150 to 200 words? These authors did it: (See slides)

The best way to get better at these is to practice writing them and read a lot of them, especially in your genre.

And then I use my backcover copy to develop my synopsis.

If you want to make a roomful of professional and aspiring writers groan, mention the word synopsis.

I used to be one of those groaning writers. Synopsis writing felt boring, and I resented having to boil down my novel into just a few pages.

So if you’re coming into synopsis writing with that kind of attitude, I can relate. Here’s what changed my mind:

My agent told me to chill out.

I complained to my first agent about how much I hated writing them and she said, “They’re not a big deal. It’s like writing an elementary school book report. You can do that.”

Something about the way she simplified it made me stop thinking of a synopsis as this big, terrible thing I had to write. Instead, I was just writing down what happens in the book. Like I did in elementary school.

The biggest thing, though, is that I switched up my order of operations.

I used to write my synopses at the very end. I would write my novel, edit my novel, polish my novel, send my novel to critique partners, and at the very end, when I absolutely couldn’t put it off any longer, I would grind

out a synopsis.

After I sold my first series, I could then sell "on proposal." Meaning an editor no longer had to see the full manuscript, but rather they might buy the book based off the first three chapters and a synopsis. So I wrote my first three chapters and then sat down to write my synopsis.

IT WAS SO MUCH FUN.

Because instead of trying to document the book as I had written it, I was discovering the story. I felt the same kind of freedom as I did with brainstorming a book.

Another advantage was I could "audition" a story line with a few sentences or a paragraph. If later I decided that it didn't work, all I had lost was a hundred words or so rather than several chapters.

Let's get down to some nuts and bolts for writing good synopses.

First, you remind yourself that, just like with your book, you'll take this through several drafts. This first attempt won't be perfect. You're just trying to get all the material on the page, and we can work on prettying it up once you're done.

Here are some particulars about writing a synopsis:

Aim for 2-4 pages unless otherwise specified. Some agents, editors, and contests request specific lengths for synopses (a one page synopsis, a ten page synopsis, etc.) but if you shoot for 2-4 pages, that should be a good length for most.

Synopses work best written in third person, present tense. Even if your story is in a different tense, this is what you'll probably want to use.

Formatting:

Single space, Times New Roman or Arial
1-inch margins

Header: Last name/Title (Morrill/The Lost Girl of Astor Street)

First line: Center the Title and word synopsis (The Lost Girl of Astor

Street synopsis)

Tell, don't show! You know how when you're writing a novel you're trying to show and not tell? Trying to keep backstory out of the first few chapters? Well, those two rules are off the table with synopses. You are telling your story instead of showing it, and that backstory is often how you start your synopsis.

Keep names to a minimum because it's easy to get them all confused. My general rule of thumb is very important characters get introduced with first and last names. Minor characters with just their first name. Anyone else who needs to be mentioned just gets specified by their role. (Piper's older brother, the librarian, the school headmistress, etc.)

The first time you mention a character by name, put it in all caps. Not all writers do this, but it helps the agent/editor to keep everybody straight.

Include all POV characters. Like in *Scorpio Races* back cover copy, we could tell that book was going to be told from two different POVs by the way the copy is written.

Tone should match your book. If your book is funny and lighthearted, that should be reflected in the synopsis.

It's tempting to lay everything out in chronological order, but it's rarely best. Sometimes you'll want to focus on one storyline for a paragraph and then another storyline for the next, even if in the book they intertwine.

Also, lay out every twist, every surprise, and include the ending. This isn't like backcover copy where you're trying to hook the reader by being mysterious. You are selling your story to an agent or editor and to do that, you want your synopsis to show that you have told a good story, and you do that by giving them all the information.

Have a friend read it: This is the best way to know how you did. If your synopsis is too long, they'll be the best at telling you what can be cut. They will also be able to spot what needs more explanation or places where you introduced too many characters.

The way I became good at writing synopses was judging contests and

reading them over and over.

Author bio

If writing your own bio freaks you out, you're not alone. When I first started writing them, they really intimidated me. It felt weird to talk about myself in third person, and I had a hard time gauging what was important and what wasn't. But bios are a valuable and necessary art form if you're hoping to get published, and once you get used to them, they're not so bad.

Let's start with a few pointers. Bios should be written in third person, especially if this is something you're putting in your book proposal. They should reflect who you are and why you are qualified for whatever it is your bio is being applied to. By which I mean, why you're qualified to write your blog or write your manuscript or be speaking on such-and-such.

This is where youth can be a drawback. Because - to put it frankly - you haven't had time to do much yet. My bio when I went to the American Christian Fiction Writers conference in 2007 was "Stephanie Morrill lives in Orlando, Florida. She is a member of ACFW."

Now, I could have written a better bio, had I received a few tips about it, but being a member of ACFW was about all I had to my name at that time. I couldn't even put a college degree on there.

Here are some options for what you can put in a bio as an unpublished writer:

What you write

Why you write it

Any awards you might have won for your writing or articles you may have had published.

Your blog

Any special education you have (college degree or whatever)

Something that qualifies you to write this book (if you're writing about missionaries in Africa and you were raised in Africa by missionaries, you should mention that.)

A few things you're passionate about, particularly if they're unusual

Any writing societies you're a member of

Basically, you want something that makes you sound interesting. We want to read books written by interesting people.

Here are a two excellent examples of young bios:

Lydia Howe is a twenty-something adventurer who grew up traversing the globe, first through the pages of books, and then in reality. Nowadays she's living the clichéd life of working at a coffee shop and writing. When she's not surrounding herself with words you can find her riding through the fields on Chadwin, her trusty lawnmower. She enjoys blogging and recently joined the worlds of Booktube and Bookstagram.

Caitlin Eha fell in love with books at a young age and never recovered. Today she is pursuing her dream of being a published novelist and screenwriter, in between the multitudinous demands of adult life. She is also a staff writer for the website Geekdom House (geekdomhouse.com). When she has a free moment, she enjoys reading, fencing, archery, cosplay, and time with her Lord. Caitlin can be found on her blog, caitlineha.wordpress.com, and on Wattpad @authorcaitlineha.

Social Media: Guiding Thoughts and Questions

If you want to sell books as a writer, there's no getting around the need for social media. Some writers enthusiastically embrace social media and others would rather not do any of it.

Rather than talk about specific methods for each platform or the various benefits of one over another, let's talk about some guiding principles.

Who is my audience?

The first question that is critical to ask is who is my audience? Just like not every book is for every reader, every post or picture is not for every person.

In the beginning, you may not know exactly who your audience is. Or maybe you just knew very broadly who you think you want to target. That is okay. But you do want to be working to get a specific idea of who your posts

are for.

For example, when I post from the Go Teen Writers account, I am always speaking to teen writers. Even though I know we have lots of writers who are not teens, teen writers are always the focus.

That is different than when I am posting from my author accounts. I hardly ever address teen writers from my author account. It can be helpful, especially in terms of voice, to think of somebody very specific. Think my audience is the specific friend of mine who really likes my books. Obviously you would never want to mention by name or anything like that, it is just so you can help to hone a personal voice for your post. Next question:

Will this serve them?

Once you have figured out who your audience is, at least the general picture, then as you are crafting a post you can ask the question will this serve them?

If the answer is no, then you know to rethink this post. Why does it not serve them? If the post is important, how could you make it serve them?

And remember service happens in a variety of ways. It doesn't necessarily mean that you are giving them something for free that will be really helpful to them, or offering sage advice that will change their lives. When I say service or serve them, I mean something as simple as will this bring a smile to their face?

We will talk more in a bit about the different types of posts, but I think it is important to point out now that you can serve your audience by promoting your own stuff whether it is a blog post or a new book you are coming out with were a new YouTube video, and you can serve them with other resources or links or memes.

But whatever it is you are posting on your account, you do want to think about who you hope it reaches and what you hope they feel or think when they read it or see it. You want to make sure that what you are posting contributes something.

Let's go ahead and talk about different types of posts in the balance

that you want.

80/20 rule

Social media falls into the broad spectrum of things that have an 80/20 rule. I'm borrowing this from Chris Syme's teaching about social media, but the basic rule is that you want 80% of your posts to offer value. In 20% of your posts should be selling. Of course this is assuming you have a product to sell, but we can also apply it to promotion. 20% of your posts should be promotion of some kind. Whether it is a blog or service or something where you personally reap the benefit.

I think this is a really good rule, because for some of us we are tempted to only go to our social media channels when we have something to sell. Or when we have a new blog post. Or whatever it. In this rule make sure that we are offering something else to our audience, which helps us to create a more engaged audience.

This rule is also helpful for those of us who tend to only offer value and warm conversation on our social media channels rather than doing any selling or promoting. And of course I am not speaking about a personal Facebook account or personal Instagram account I am talking specifically about when you are using social media to try and sell your product.

But some of us struggle to actually use it to sell, so we end up investing a lot of time in being present sharing good content and having conversation but we are not reaping the financial benefits of having a social media. The 80/20 rule make sure that we get the best of both worlds.

But what should you talk about?

What you want to do is look for the overlap between what you want to talk about and what your audience wants to hear you talk about. And maybe you don't know what your audience wants you to talk about, that is okay. Sometimes it takes a little bit of trial and error to figure this out, and it might evolve.

What I suggest you do is start a list of 7 to 10 topics. Maybe you have lots of topics that interest you that you like talking about on social media. If I were to make a quick list for myself here are some of my interests:

Writing
reading
cooking
parenting
baseball
travel
history
podcasts

So when I think about my readers who have chosen to follow me on social media, I know that some of them are writers, but not all of them. So I do not talk about writing on my social media platforms other than when I show behind-the-scenes peeks of my writing process. But I don't talk about any of the dorky writing stuff that the rest of us geek out about.

Baseball. While I enjoy talking about the Royals baseball team, I know that the majority of my followers are not from Kansas City and even if they are they are not enthusiastic about baseball, so it is something that I am interested in but I don't talk about.

Cooking and parenting are topics that I am interested in because I am an adult who both cooks and parents, but my books are for teenagers. When I was a teenager I was not interested in cooking or parenting, so I don't talk about it.

I have found that my readers really enjoy talking about podcasts, audiobooks, reading, interesting bits of history, travel. So I keep my focus on those things because your social media page or account is like you are hosting a party. You would never invite somebody over to your house and then only talk about you, only serve food you like, only play music you like. When you are hosting you care about the comfort and well-being of your guest. So you can think about social media that way that you are hosting and that, yes you want to be yourself, but you also want to be a good host.

If your posts are boring, I assume your book is boring.

If I am following a writer on social media, and they are writer who writes very heavy, political books that I have a certain expectation when I go to their page. I expect them to be talking about heavy and political

topics.

Same as if I go to an author's page because I really enjoy their lighthearted romance. If their pages full of posts about why marriage equals death, that is going to feel off to me. I am not going to want to hang around here. You want a consistent tone with your product.

Regular posts, not feast or famine

Of course the algorithms and platforms will come and go, but I do think it's important regardless of where you are to post with some regularity. What you don't want to do is disappear from an account for months or even weeks—except for rarely—and then come back only when you have a book releasing or only when you decide to start your blog backup or whatever it is.

Query emails and Favor-asking emails

I'm not the best person to talk to about query emails because I've never been successful with one. My success always happened at writing conferences. But I do know some basics that I can pass along, and I definitely know about favor-asking emails.

Query emails:

First, you want to have an email address that looks professional. No FluffyDucks at Hotmail or anything. Something with your name.

Do your research. Know who you're querying and why.

If you've met, mention it.

That's a good way to start your email:

Dear Mrs. Manning,

I really enjoyed the blog post you wrote on your agency's site about what you wish you saw more of in YA fantasy novels. Your comment about the need for more characters who love cats made me think you would enjoy

my YA fantasy novel.

This alone is going to get whoever you're querying to read the next sentence. Just showing that you did your research and you know something about them and you're being intentional will be huge.

Next you want to make sure to share about your project. Title goes in all caps, typically.

THE CAT'S MEOW is a 95,000 word urban fantasy novel about Katrina Collins, who discovers an alternate life in which she is actually a cat.

Then you share your back cover copy. If it's part of a series, you mention that.

THE CAT'S MEOW is the first book in a three book series.

Then you close with a few lines about yourself, taken from your bio.

Then you thank them for their time and consideration and sign with some version of, "I look forward to hearing your thoughts, Sincerely, name."

Favor-asking emails:

Guests for your blog, or endorsements for a book, or participation in some kind of event you're hosting. Anything that is asking somebody for something.

Email. Not Facebook messenger or anything like that. If you must use FB messenger, typically it's best to ask for their email address, but every author I know has a way to contact them on their website.

Keep your tone appropriate to how much you know them. A lot of my favor-asking emails are for endorsements or being on Go Teen Writers. You want to start with why you're asking them.

So it might look like this:

Hi Joanne,

I'm currently looking for endorsements for my upcoming release with Blink/HarperCollins, and you immediately came to mind because of how much I love *A Quiet Sky*.

Or

Hi, McCall,

This summer on *Go Teen Writers*, we are featuring a "guest author panelist" and I would love to have you one week.

Then you want to lay out what is involved, including any kind of timelines or deadlines.

If it's an endorsement I'm seeking, I'll give my one sentence pitch and then say something like, "The full back cover copy is included below the email." My publisher would like to have all endorsements submitted by this date.

If it's an interview request, I'll give further details. This is how many questions I'm going to ask, this is what it will look like on the blog, and here is why I think you will be a great guest. I would need everything back from you by this specific time.

Acknowledge that this is a favor and keep the pressure off. I know you get lots of requests for interviews or endorsements and it's impossible to say yes to all of them. If now isn't a good time for you, I completely understand.

Check your spelling. Read it outloud.

Be YOU. Use YOUR voice.

The first agent who was ever interested in me sent the request for a partial when I was literally holding my one week old baby. When I wrote back to her, I told her that I had just had a baby, but I would get everything sent to her as soon as I was able. She wrote back congratulations, and I said

thank you, that I wasn't getting much sleep, but it was okay because she was so stinkin' cute. I almost didn't send that, and I probably wouldn't have if I hadn't been so tired. But later, after we were working together, she told me that when she read that, she knew she was going to like my book because she could tell I had a great voice. So, yes, you want to be professional and considerate and all those good things, but you always don't want to sterilize and scrub away your unique voice.