

Writers' Workshop Background

Diane Duane & Peter Morwood

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The contents of the toolbox:

- (1) Something to write on.
- (2) Something to write with.
- (3) Something to write about.

(3) is entirely up to you, and nowadays the obvious answer to (1) and (2) is a computer with a word-processing program: Diane and I both use **Microsoft® Word 2003**, though that will change when one or other of us finally gets a Mac. If you have both a desktop and a laptop, make sure that your word-processing installations have the same format settings, otherwise you'll get different page lengths for each machine. This can be an annoyance when writing prose, and a real menace if doing anything in screenplay format.

Some writers still use other methods. Harlan Ellison (author of many TV scripts and more short stories than we can list) is not a computer user; in fact he's *famously* not a computer user. Instead, as throughout his career, he uses and insists he will continue to use a typewriter: the current one is an Olympia SM9, a manual machine, not even an electric. He's mentioned more than once that this level of technology is just right for his speed of output, that the typewriter needs neither power cable nor batteries, and has never, ever crashed and lost his work.

Neil Gaiman (*Sandman* comics, *Stardust* novel and film etc.) often uses a **Lamy 2000** fountain pen and a **Moleskine** journal to block out preliminary ideas and even write first drafts, before transcribing to his computer. Diane scribbles with a **Uniball** rollerball pen on a **Migros** or **Weser** pad of squared graph paper. Peter uses a **Pilot G2/23** gel-tip and an A5 **Black & Red** notebook, though he too is a convert to fountain pen.

The reasoning behind this deliberately retro attitude is sometimes that it's quicker to get out pen and paper than boot up the laptop, or that an Idea hits when typing isn't convenient – or indeed that it's too easy to delete computer-written errors, which leads to sloppy writing: setting down words in more indelible form requires the writer to give a little more thought beforehand.

Dictation is another approach; either the low-tech version of talking into a tape-recorder then transcribing, or using a microphone to “write” directly, using a Voice-to-Text program such as *Dragon Naturally Speaking*. There’s also the half-way house of a digital recorder which transfers its data straight to the V-t-T; just be careful to check the final text, because the recorder doesn’t have a screen where you can catch mistakes as they happen.

Watch out for homophones like “peeled/pealed,” “horde/hoard,” “read/reed” etc., which sound the same but have different meanings dependent on spelling. Given the computer world’s default bias toward American spelling, also keep an eye out for *transatlantic* homophones like “check/cheque,” “tire/tyre” etc. which are doubly pernicious in that they won’t show up as wrong either in context or spelling, unless you’ve made very sure that your spell-checker is set to the appropriate “dialect.”

No matter how high-tech you might want to be, there remain advantages to the traditional pen/pencil-and-pad which should *never* be overlooked:

Unlike computers, dictation machines or typewriters, it operates in almost complete silence. More socially acceptable in coffee bars, libraries, planes, trains – and just the thing for the Great Idea that woke you up at 3.30 AM.

Unlike computers, dictation machines and *some* typewriters, it has almost no power requirement; during daylight or in well-lit areas, you’ll need no external power whatsoever, but catching that Great Idea at 3.30 AM calls for some assistance, if only a pen with a built-in light source. (*This is strangely useful: look for the [EMI Nite-Writer II](#) – P.M.*)

Unlike computers and dictation machines, pen and paper is virtually crash-proof. An excessively wet work environment should be avoided, since fountain-pen ink starts to run and the paper gets all soggy – but there are even pens and pads capable of defeating this problem if you really need them.

Unlike virtually everything else nowadays, it’s usually never considered a security problem. Just make sure your Significant Other is aware that any steamy dialogue is for your fiction and not a first-draft love letter to someone else...

DD says: ...OK, enough from the technophobe already.

You could be forgiven for gathering from some of the above that its author was frightened *in utero* by something mechanical. (The fault sure wasn't his mom's: during WWII she drove big rigs that delivered AA guns and tanks to the local dockyard. In later life she did acquire a pleasantly minimalist approach to technology, stating that all she needed for the living room was enough remotes, and for the kitchen, a Cuisinart and a microwave. But even now the machinery in the house displays a tendency to yank P's chain whenever possible, at which point I come and remonstrate with it.)

The secret to easy machine-handled notetaking is fairly simple:

(a) Hibernate your computer rather than shutting it down "cold": and find a good "sticky note" program that suits you. There are many of them out there, and many of them are free. I use *JC Sticky Deluxe*, a widget you can acquire from Yahoo Widgets.

(b) Find a good small digital recorder and keep it handy at all times. Empty it into your computer at regular intervals. *Dragon Naturally Speaking*, as Peter says, will learn your voice and transcribe your notes for you, but you may prefer to transcribe them yourself, as you may find you have things to add during the process.

And yes, for emergencies, have a small notebook handy. (I use a small flip-pad Moleskine with an elastic hold-closed band that keeps the pen attached to the whole package.)

And for successful writing management when a computer is your primary tool, one thing is important:

Back up. **BACK UP BACK UP BACK UP**. Acquire or write a script to get your computer to do this for you automatically at least once a day. (Many of the newer stand-alone drives will do this for you automatically: check your hardware manufacturer's manual for details.) Also: have at least one off-site backup of all vital writing work. I keep copies of everything serious "in the cloud" via MS Word 2003's ability to establish a Net-based "shared workspace". While normally this service (via an installation of Windows Server) costs *molto dinero*, there are a few webhosting sites out there that offer such virtual server hosting for free: Google for them.

On the local level: when you end your work day, save everything of import to a cheap USB / flash drive (or a more expensive stand-alone portable drive) and leave it in your pocket, your purse, or whatever other container you *know* you will grab when you realize the house is on fire and you're already busy making sure that your family and pets are safely out. Your computer may be the last thing on your mind at such a time (or the first, but I bet you'll forget all about it until you've found the cat). Make this a daily ritual like toothbrushing. You may never need it, but if you do, you'll be so glad you acquired the habit.

Recommended books:

A good dictionary. This is so obvious that it shouldn't need to be said. Unfortunately it *does* need to be said, since misspelling and incorrect definition of even the most obvious words has become all too common. A writer can no longer assume that an editor will catch their spelling and grammatical mistakes (such an assumption is lazy, anyway.) If in doubt, *check*. Something mentioned earlier bears repetition: computer-users should always make sure of what version of English – UK or US – the checker is set to check. This applies less to the US than the UK and Ireland, since the default language of most computer programs is US English anyway – but always remember that Mr. Murphy is waiting to demonstrate his Law for the unwary.

We'd also recommend that, if the program has a *grammar-checker*, you disable it except for the purposes of experimentation. Though we can't comment on any other WP programs, the Grammar & Style checker in **Microsoft® Word 2003** is at best painfully pedantic, acceptable for formal business letters, but not for fiction, and definitely not for anything resembling realistic modern dialogue. At worst – and all too frequently – it's downright wrong. In the course of writing this Workshop document, I (*P.M.*) caught the checker making half a dozen standard errors* in sentence structure and punctuation use – it insists, for example, that when I wrote *your only original* in the footnote on p.4, what I meant was *you're only original*. I meant nothing of the sort.

This sort of program does have its uses, especially when set to a low enough (e.g. non-intrusive) level. It'll catch common spelling errors, and will make suggestions about grammar if you let it. Once in a while it's useful to rack both spell- and grammar-checker up to full interference level and let them take a pass through a manuscript. They can help (sometimes) in spotting mistakes, but never *rely* on them. Neither computer programs nor the following books are the Last Word on style, sentence construction, and clarity of writing. They just provide a second, third, or fourth opinion. Which one you use is up to you.

* Not errors between US and UK English, just mistakes.

Roget's Thesaurus. The current edition has supposedly dropped a few outdated definitions in favor of more modern ones. We have both the 1975 and 2000 editions, and haven't found any deletions so far, perhaps because we've got better things to do than a fine-tooth-comb comparative search. It's a good idea to have a thesaurus or similar synonym finder handy and most (or all?) word-processing programs have one – but *don't* over-use it. The best way is to check the thesaurus for alternatives to a word of which you're uncertain. There's no need to accept every suggestion, and you probably won't want to. Writing styles differ, but you're likely to prefer your original choice. Actually *knowing* a larger-than-average vocabulary is one thing; *writing* that way is very different. Usually all it proves is that there's an unsupervised thesaurus loose in your house...

The Elements of Style by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White (often referred to simply as “Strunk & White.”) An absolute essential, and also, fortunately, short. Including glossary and index, there are only 105 pages. The main text provides a straightforward explanation of how to, and how *not* to, express yourself through the written word. Bear in mind that the stylistic requirements of writing fiction frequently involve, indeed *require* breaking several of their rules, but at least afterwards using stuff like sentence fragments (preferably in dialogue, where people really *do* talk like that) will be through intent rather than ignorance.

On Writing by Stephen King. The first part of the book is autobiographical; it then settles down (in the section called *Toolbox*, on page 109 of our US edition) to talk about the actual mechanics of writing. King's combination of instruction and anecdote is more memorable than a coldly technical approach. Most people giving up a chunk of convention time to attend this workshop want to improve their fiction-writing skills: **this is the only book in our list to deal with the nuts and bolts of writing *fiction*, so read it!**

Troublesome Words by Bill Bryson. This book first appeared in 1984 as *The Penguin Dictionary of Troublesome Words*. If you happen to find a second-hand copy of the old version, grab it by all means, but the new version is much larger and more comprehensive. The title says it all: words commonly misspelt, misdefined, misattributed, and just plain misunderstood.

Eats, Shoots & Leaves by Lynne Truss. It was an unexpected best-seller in the UK in 2003 (though that doesn't mean any of the people who bought and read it are going to pay attention), and has been recently revised and

republished. Truss is quite rightly vexed by the sloppiness of modern punctuation: for instance, the appearance of an apostrophe now usually means nothing more than “Look out, an S is coming!” Despite its humor, this is an important little book. Just because everyone else is slipshod about the minutiae doesn’t mean you should join in. Stand back and watch them jump off that proverbial bridge, knowing that you at least can report the incident with perfect clarity.

The Tough Guide to Fantasyland by Diana Wynne Jones. Back in print as of 2006: a funny, useful guide to clichés and stereotypes in the “typical” fantasy novel. There isn’t a law (except perhaps the law of *No Sale*) that forbids the use of cardboard characters, stale situations and hackneyed phrases; but at least you shouldn’t use them in ignorance. Once identified, they can be avoided, or used as a springboard for something more original. You all might know a book which did just that: it’s called *The Color of Magic*. Clichés are undeniably useful – the reason why words and phrases *become* clichés is that they’re so convenient – but relying on them to the exclusion of all else is like a fixer-upper with a well-equipped toolbox who only ever uses hammer and nails.

Optional Books:

The Elements of Screenwriting by Irwin Blacker and *Elements of Style for Screenwriters* by Paul Argentini are well worth a look. Argentini also has a section on writing for the stage – something those of you who've read Stephen Briggs's dramatizations might find very interesting.

Many screen techniques now appear regularly in prose, some subtle, others as straightforward establishing shots, intercuts and pullbacks. Several Discworld novels have unmistakably cinematic openings, including tracking shots, pullbacks and jump-cuts. Even if you don't intend to use the screenwriting terminology, just the effect, it helps to know what you're talking about (otherwise it would be like describing a wheelie when what you mean is a handbrake turn...)

After the live-action adaptations of **Hogfather** and **The Color of Magic**, messing about with screenplay format may be on your minds. Even if you don't intend to go any further than an experiment or two, it's an interesting exercise in discipline that forces you to combine brevity with clarity – because no matter how intricate the scene description or convoluted the dialogue, *one page of script = 1 minute of live-action screen time or 30 seconds of animation*. This isn't a guideline; it's a Rule set in stone.

Use only 12-point Courier font; nothing else, otherwise it throws off that strict timing (and proves at a glance that you're not professional enough to know – or look up – proper submission format.) These and other restrictions mean that every word has to count.

The two industry-standard professional screenwriting programs are [Movie Magic Screenwriter](#) and [Final Draft](#).^{*} These are Not Cheap, but do offer free limited-use demo versions. [Celtx](#) (download) and [Scripted Writer](#) (online) are both free. A shareware program, [Sophocles](#), is still available, with [Sophocles 2007 Beta](#) the last update. However, since the parent company abruptly ceased trading more than a year ago, registration keys to unlock the full program are no longer available. Regard it as a toy or a practice tool, but nothing more.

^{*} Opinion time: although we have both these programs, we prefer MM Screenwriter, for ease of use and for excellence of (free) customer service.

Some advice from the experts:

Strunk and White's Principles Of Composition:

Choose a suitable design.
 Use the active voice.
 Put statements in positive form.
 Use definite, specific, concrete language.
 Omit needless words.
 Place yourself in the background.
 Write naturally.
 Write with nouns and verbs.
 Revise and rewrite.
 Do not overwrite.
 Avoid qualifiers.
 Do not affect a breezy manner.
 Use orthodox spelling.
 Do not explain too much.
 Do not construct awkward adverbs.
 Avoid fancy words.
 Avoid dialect.
 Avoid mixing languages.
 Prefer the standard to the offbeat.

George Orwell's Rules:

Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech that you are used to seeing in print.
 Never use a long word where a short one will do.
 If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
 Never use the passive where you can use the active.
 Never use a foreign phrase, scientific word, or jargon if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.*
 Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

George Orwell's Questions:

What am I trying to say?
 What words will express it?
 What image or idiom will make it clearer?

* However, Ian Fleming does that very thing, as you'll see a couple of pages further on.

Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?
Could I put it more shortly?
Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?

Robert A. Heinlein's Rules:

You Must Write.
Finish What You Start.
You Must Refrain From Rewriting, Except to Editorial Order.
You Must Put Your Story on the Market.
You Must Keep it on the Market until it has Sold.
Start Working on Something Else.

Kurt Vonnegut's Short Story Rules:

Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted.
Give the reader at least one character he or she can root for.
Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.
Every sentence must do one of two things – reveal character or advance the action.
Start as close to the end as possible.
Be a sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them – in order that the reader may see what they are made of.
Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia.
Give your readers as much information as possible as soon as possible. To heck with suspense. Readers should have such complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages.

This is a fascinating piece of work, by a writer whose hero has probably entertained more people than any other single fictional character in the 20th century (and I do include young Mr. Potter in that; he hasn't been going for anything like as long.) It's the fullest version of Fleming's essay I've ever seen. The site where I found it is long gone, and any versions remaining available now begin at *People often ask me* – in other words, halfway through, with other cuts afterwards. The moral of the story, if there is one, is to save interesting research material off-line, rather than merely bookmark it. There's no guarantee it'll still be there when you look again.

HOW TO WRITE A THRILLER

By Ian Fleming

(with footnotes by Peter Morwood)

The Craft of writing sophisticated thrillers is almost dead. Writers seem to be ashamed of inventing heroes who are white, villains who are black, and heroines who are a delicate shade of pink.

I am not an angry young, or even middle-aged, man. My books are not “engaged.” I have no message for suffering humanity and, though I was bullied at school and lost my virginity like so many of us used to do in the old days, I have never been tempted to foist these and other harrowing personal experiences on the public. My *opuscula** do not aim at changing people or making them go out and do something. They are written for warm-blooded heterosexuals in railway trains, aeroplanes and beds.

I have a charming relative who is an angry young *litterateur* of renown. He is maddened by the fact that more people read my books than his. Not long ago we had semi-friendly words on the subject and I tried to cool his boiling ego by saying that his artistic purpose was far, far higher than mine. The target of his books was the head and, to some extent at least, the heart. The target of my books, I said, lay somewhere between the solar plexus and, well, the upper thigh. These self-deprecatory remarks did nothing to mollify him and finally, with some impatience and perhaps with something of an ironical glint in my eye, I asked him how he described himself on his passport†.

* ‘Minor works’ – the diminutive of ‘opus’, an artistic work – and yes, I had to look it up. That’s what dictionaries are for. Fleming, of course, was an Old Etonian, though I suspect even he learnt to remember this word by writing it out 1000 times. Just a guess.

† This was back in the days when a British passport showed the bearer’s occupation as well as name, etc. James Bond’s own passport described him as a “businessman.”

“I bet you call yourself an ‘*Author*,’” I said. He agreed, with a shade of reluctance, perhaps because he scented sarcasm on the way. “Just so,” I said. “Well, I describe myself as a ‘*Writer*’. There are authors and artists, and then again there are writers and painters.”

This rather spiteful jibe, which forced him, most unwillingly, into the ranks of The Establishment, while stealing for myself the halo of a simple craftsman of the people, made the angry young man angrier than ever and I don’t now see him as often as I used to. But the point I wish to make is that if you decide to become a professional writer, you must, broadly speaking, decide whether you wish to write for fame, for pleasure or for money. I write, unashamedly, for pleasure and money.

I also feel that, while thrillers may not be Literature with a capital L, it is possible to write what I can best describe as “*Thrillers designed to be read as literature*”, the practitioners of which have included such as Edgar Allen Poe, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Eric Ambler and Graham Greene. I see nothing shameful in aiming as high as these.

All right then, so we have decided to write for money and to aim at certain standards in our writing. These standards will include an unmannered prose style, unexceptional grammar and a certain integrity in our narrative.

But these qualities will not make a bestseller. There is only one recipe for a bestseller and it is a very simple one. If you look back on the bestsellers you have read, you will find that they all have one quality: you simply have to turn the page.

Nothing must be allowed to interfere with this essential dynamic of the thriller. You cannot linger too long over descriptive passages. There must be no complications in names, relationships, journeys or geographical settings to confuse or irritate the reader. He must never ask himself “*Where am I? Who is this person? What the hell are they all doing?*” Above all there must never be those maddening recaps where the hero maunders about his unhappy fate, goes over in his mind a list of suspects, or reflects what he might have done or what he proposes to do next. By all means, set the scene or enumerate the heroine’s measurements as lovingly as you wish, but in doing so, each word must tell, and interest or titillate the reader before the action hurries on.

I confess that I often sin grievously in this respect. I am excited by the poetry of things and places, and the pace of my stories sometimes suffers while I grab the reader by the throat and stuff him with great gobbets of what I consider should interest him, at the same time shaking him and shouting “*Enjoy this, damn you!*” But this is a sad lapse, and I must confess that in one of my books, **Goldfinger**, three whole chapters were devoted to a single game of golf.

Well, having achieved a workmanlike style and the all-essential pace of narrative, what are we to put in the book? Briefly, the ingredients are anything that will thrill any of the human senses – absolutely anything.

In this department, my contribution to the art of thriller-writing has been to attempt the total stimulation of the reader all the way through, even to his taste-buds. For instance, I have never understood why people in books have to eat such sketchy and indifferent meals. English* heroes seem to live on cups of tea and glasses of beer, and when they do get a square meal we never heard what it consists of.

Personally, I am not a gourmet and I abhor food-and-winemanship†. My favourite food is scrambled eggs. In the original typescript of **Live and Let Die**, James Bond consumed scrambled eggs so often that a perceptive proof-reader suggested that this rigid pattern of life must be becoming a security risk for Bond. If he was being followed, his tail would only have to go into restaurants and say “Was there a man here eating scrambled eggs?” to know whether he was on the right track or not. So I had to go through the book changing the menus.

It must surely be more stimulating to the reader’s senses if, instead of writing “He made a hurried meal off the *plat du jour*‡ – excellent cottage pie and vegetables, followed by home-made trifle”, you write “Being

* Always ‘English’, never ‘British’; the Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish must often wonder about this – and it continues: “For England, James!” is a line repeated several times in **Goldeneye**.

† This may explain why he sometimes gets details of food and drink wrong.

‡ Personal opinion is that anywhere offering cottage pie or similar pub-food wouldn’t call it *plat du jour*, but “dish of the day” or “today’s special” – anything, in fact, except a term that’s pretentious anywhere but where French is spoken. And if they *did* use *plat du jour* for cottage pie, I’d leave at once. High-flown menu French where it’s not needed means high-flown prices where they’re not justified.

instinctively distrustful of all *plats du jour*, he ordered four fried eggs cooked on both sides, hot buttered toast and a large cup of black coffee.” The following points should be noted: first, we all prefer breakfast foods to the sort of food one usually gets at luncheon and dinner; secondly, this is an independent character who knows what he wants and gets it; thirdly, four fried eggs has the sound of a real man’s meal and, in our imagination, a large cup of black coffee sits well on our taste buds after the rich, buttery sound of the fried eggs and the hot buttered toast.

What I aim at is a certain disciplined exoticism. I have not reread any of my books to see if this stands up to close examination, but I think you will find that the sun is always shining in my books – a state of affairs which always lifts the spirit of the English* reader – that most of the settings are in themselves pleasurable, taking the reader to exciting places around the world, and that a strong hedonistic streak is always there to offset the grimmer side of Bond’s adventures.

At this stage let me pause for a moment and assure you that, while all this sounds devilish crafty, it has only been by endeavouring to analyse the success of my books for the purpose of this essay that I have come to these conclusions. In fact, I write about what pleases and stimulates me.

My plots are fantastic, while being often based upon truth. They go wildly beyond the probable but not, I think, beyond the possible. Even so, they would stick in the gullet of the reader and make him throw the book angrily aside – for a reader particularly hates feeling he is being hoaxed – but for two technical devices: first, the aforesaid speed of the narrative, which hustles the reader quickly beyond each danger point of mockery and, secondly, the constant use of familiar household names and objects which reassure him that he and the writer have still got their feet on the ground. A Ronson lighter, a 4.5 litre Bentley with an Amherst-Villiers supercharger (please note the solid exactitude[†]), the Ritz Hotel in London, the 21 Club in New York, the exact names of flora and fauna, even Bond’s Sea Island

* There’s that word again. Just to emphasise the point, Bond himself isn’t English at all; he’s half Scottish, half French-Swiss. This is canonical, written by Fleming himself in **You Only Live Twice**.

† Yet he put Bond’s Walther PPK *automatic* in a Berns-Martin “Lightning” *revolver* holster; worse, it’s an inverted holster (the gun is grip-downwards) which holds the revolver in place with a curved spring around the cylinder. The flat-sided PPK would fall out every single time.

cotton shirts with short sleeves. All these details are *points de repère** to comfort the reader on his journey into fantastic adventure.

People often ask me, “How do you manage to think of that? What an extraordinary (or sometimes, “extraordinarily dirty”) mind you must have.”

I certainly have got vivid powers of imagination, but I don’t think there is anything very odd about that. We are all fed fairy stories and adventure stories and ghost stories for the first 20 years of our lives, and the only difference between me and perhaps you is that my imagination earns me money. But, to revert to my first book, **Casino Royale**, there are three strong incidents in the book which carry it along and which are all based on fact. I extracted them from my wartime memories of the Naval Intelligence Division of the Admiralty, dolled them up, attached a hero, a villain and a heroine, and there was the book.

The first was the attempt on Bond’s life outside the Hotel Splendide.

SMERSH had given two Bulgarian assassins box camera cases to hang over their shoulders. One was of red leather, the other one, blue. SMERSH told the Bulgarians that the red case contained a high-explosive bomb and the blue one a powerful smokescreen, under cover of which the two assassins could escape. One was to throw the red bomb and the other was then to press the button on the blue case. But the Bulgars mistrusted the plan and decided to press the button on the blue case and envelop themselves in the smokescreen before throwing the bomb. In fact, the blue case also contained a bomb, powerful enough to blow both the Bulgars to fragments and remove all evidence which might point to SMERSH.

Farfetched, you might say. In fact, this was the method used in the Russian attempt on Von Papen’s life in Ankara in the middle of the war. On that occasion the assassins were also Bulgarians and they were blown to nothing while Von Papen and his wife, walking from their house to the embassy; were only bruised by the blast.

As to the gambling scene, this grew in my mind from the following incident. I and my chief, the Director of Naval Intelligence – Admiral Godfrey – in

* ‘*Landmarks*’, used in the sense of ‘*things that are solidly real*’. See Orwell’s fifth rule: French used here is either ironic or pretentious, and since Fleming, notoriously lacking in any sense of humour, isn’t being ironic, it leaves the other thing. Plain English ‘*reassuring landmarks*’ works just as well.

plain clothes, were flying to Washington in 1941 for secret talks with the American Office of Naval Intelligence, before America came into the war. Our seaplane* touched down at Lisbon for an overnight stop, and our Intelligence people told us how Lisbon was crawling with German secret agents. The chief of these and his two assistants gambled every night in the casino at the neighbouring Estoril. I suggested to the DNI that he and I should have a look at these people. We went, and there were the three men, playing at the high *chemin de fer* table. Then the feverish idea came to me that I would sit down and gamble against these men and defeat them, thereby reducing the funds of the German Secret Service.

It was a foolhardy plan which would have needed a golden streak of luck. I had £50 in travel money. The chief German agent had run a bank three times. I *bancoed*† it and lost. I *suivied* and lost again, and *suivied* a third time and was cleaned out, a humiliating experience which added to the sinews of war of the German Secret Service and reduced me sharply in my chief's estimation. It was this true incident which is the kernel of Bond's great gamble against Le Chiffre.

Finally, the torture scene. What I described in **Casino Royale** was a greatly watered-down version of a French-Moroccan torture known as *passer á la mandoline*‡, which was practiced on several of our agents during the war.

So you see the line between fact and fantasy is a very narrow one. I think I could trace most of the central incidents in my books to some real happenings.

* Incorrect terminology for an aviation buff: a "seaplane" is a land-based aircraft *adapted* for water landing with floats in place of wheels. What Fleming means here is a "flying-boat," an aircraft *purpose-built* for water landing with a boat-shaped hull and usually no wheels at all (see Short Empire-Class, Boeing Clipper etc.)

† Foreign words correctly used: the technical terminology for this card-game is in French. However, I'd have appreciated a quick explanation of what '*banco*' and '*suivi*' mean, and how they're relevant to the drama of the game. I discovered later that Fleming matched the full value of the German's stake (*banco*), lost his bet, then rather than let the play go round the table and try to recoup his losses, he followed (*suivi*) with two more full-stake bets and lost all his money.

‡ This is another example of correct foreign usage, since there isn't an English equivalent term for this torture (though the *technique* probably exists somewhere.) It means "passed through the slicer," and refers to the mandoline found in a kitchen – though the pun involving a wire-strung musical instrument is nastily appropriate. In case you were wondering, the person being interrogated stands naked on tip-toe straddling a taut piano-wire, and as they get tired or their feet cramp, their weight on the wire does the rest.

We thus come to the final and supreme hurdle in the writing of a thriller. You must know thrilling things before you can write about them. Imagination alone isn't enough, but stories you hear from friends or read in the papers can be built up by a fertile imagination and a certain amount of research and documentation into incidents that will also ring true in fiction.

Having assimilated all this encouraging advice, your heart will nevertheless quail at the physical effort involved in writing even a thriller. I warmly sympathise with you. I too, am lazy. Probably even lazier than you. My heart sinks when I contemplate the two or three hundred virgin sheets of foolscap I have to besmirch with more or less well chosen words in order to produce a 60,000 word book.

In my case, one of the first essentials is to create a vacuum in my life which can only be satisfactorily filled by some form of creative work, whether it be writing, painting, sculpting, composing or just building a boat. I am fortunate in this respect. I built a small house on the north shore of Jamaica in 1946 and arranged my life so I could spend at least two months of the winter there. For the first six years I had plenty to do during these months exploring Jamaica, coping with staff and getting to know the locals, and minutely examining the underwater terrain within my reef. But by the sixth year I had exhausted all these possibilities, and I was about to get married – a prospect which filled me with terror and mental fidget. To give my idle hands something to do, and as an antibody to my qualms about the marriage state after 43 years as a bachelor, I decided one day to damned well sit down and write a book. The therapy was successful. And while I still do a certain amount of writing in the midst of my London Life, it is on my annual visits to Jamaica that all my books have been written.

But, failing a hideaway such as I possess, I can recommend hotel bedrooms as far removed from your usual “life” as possible. Your anonymity in these drab surroundings and your lack of friends and distractions in the strange locale will create a vacuum which should force you into a writing mood and, if your pocket is shallow, into a mood which will also make you write fast and with application.*

* Diane does this – in somewhere without the distraction of broadband, free or otherwise – and assures me that it does indeed “concentrate the mind wonderfully”. So, according to Dr Johnson, does the knowledge that you'll be hanged in the morning. But that's another sort of dead-line entirely.

The next essential is to keep strictly to a routine. I write for about three hours in the morning – from about 9:30 till 12:30 and I do another hour's work between six and seven in the evening. The whole of this four hours of daily work is devoted to writing narrative. I do it all on the typewriter, using six fingers. The act of typing is far less exhausting than the act of writing, and you end up with a more or less clean manuscript.* At the end of this I reward myself by numbering the pages and putting them away in a spring-back folder.

I never correct anything and I never go back to what I have written, except to the foot of the last page to see where I have got to. If you once look back, you are lost. How could you have written this drivel? How could you have used “*terrible*” six times on one page? And so forth.

If you interrupt the writing of fast narrative with too much introspection and self-criticism, you will be lucky if you write 500 words a day and you will be disgusted with them into the bargain. By following my formula, you write 2,000 words a day and you aren't disgusted with them until the book is finished, which will be in about six weeks. I don't even pause from writing to choose the right word or to verify spelling or a fact. All this can be done when your book is finished.

When my book is completed I spend about a week going through it, correcting the most glaring errors and rewriting passages. I then have it properly typed with chapter headings and all the rest of the trimmings. I then go through it again, have the worst pages retyped and send it off to my publisher.

They are a sharp-eyed bunch at Jonathan Cape and, apart from commenting on the book as a whole, they make detailed suggestions which I either embody or discard. Then the final typescript goes to the printer and in due course the galley or page proofs are there and you can go over them with a fresh eye. Then the book is published and you start getting letters from people saying that *Vent Vert* is made by Balmain[†] and not by Dior, that the

* If done on a computer, the manuscript can be completely clean – but with a computer, it's so easy to go back and correct things (without needing to re-type an entire page) that extra discipline is needed to keep to Fleming's next piece of advice about leaving things alone until you're done.

† Which it is; getting brand names right is easy – so easy that sometimes you can get them wrong.

Orient Express has vacuum and not hydraulic brakes^{*}, and that you have *mousseline* sauce and not *béarnaise* with asparagus[†].

Such mistakes are really nobody's fault except the author's, and they make him blush furiously when he sees them in print. But the majority of the public does not mind them or, worse, does not even notice them, and it is a dig at the author's vanity to realise how quickly the reader's eye skips across the words which it has taken him so many months to try to arrange in the right sequence.

But what, after all these labours, are the rewards of writing and, in my case, of writing thrillers?

First of all, they are financial. You don't make a great deal of money from royalties and translation rights and so forth and, unless you are very industrious and successful, you could only just about live on these profits, but if you sell the serial rights and the film rights, you do very well.

Above all, being a comparatively successful writer is a good life. You don't have to work at it all the time and you carry your office around in your head. And you are far more aware of the world around you.

Writing makes you more alive to your surroundings and, since the main ingredient of living, though you might not think so to look at most human beings, is to be alive, this is quite a worthwhile by-product of writing – even if you only write thrillers.

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* The same sort of trainspotter will probably then tell you that the noise you described them making was wrong... Does the type of brake matter to your story? If so, get it right; if not, don't go into the sort of details that can trip you up.

† *Hollandaise* usually goes with asparagus, and *mousseline* is *hollandaise* with whipped cream folded into it. *Béarnaise* usually goes with beef, as when Tiffany Case made some for Bond aboard the *Queen Elizabeth* in **Diamonds are Forever**. However this works for character development. Remember Fleming's own comment about four fried eggs: "*an independent character who knows what he wants and gets it*" is quite capable of demanding "the wrong" sauce from preference rather than error, and if the bad-tempered Gordon Ramsay-type chef gets snotty, a Walther PPK trumps a Michelin star every time.

As I've just demonstrated, it's very easy to pick holes and make sarcastic comments about Fleming's work; the practice is almost a hobby for some. But despite all the errors, he could tell a "rattling good yarn" at such a pace that the picking of holes only takes place much later.

It's what the TV Tropes website calls "Refrigerator Logic" – you don't think "hang on a minute" as the error happens on-screen or on-page, only afterwards when you've gone to the fridge for another whatever-you've-gone-to-the-fridge-for.

The point of my emphasis here is that so many of these mistakes could have, and *should have*, been corrected before the book went to press. With access to the internet in general and Wikipedia* in particular, anyone securing fantastic stories to something resembling reality with nails of solid fact can at least have a better chance of getting those facts right.

* Although it's never a good idea to use Wikipedia as your only source of information on anything; too many people can add their opinions, whether or not they have any academic authority to back them up. Use your local library as well.

The Internet:

The internet is full of useful, helpful websites about writing; just bear in mind that *useful* and *helpful* often includes the unspoken caveats “more-or-less” and “not as much as they seem.” Here are a couple of good ones.

[The Turkey City Lexicon](#)

This is a non-copyrighted “*primer for Science Fiction Workshops.*” It provides a comprehensive list of cliché plot situations, tropes, tics and plain bad habits that, according to writer/editors Lewis Shiner and Bruce Sterling, pop up repeatedly in workshop situations. Diana Wynne Jones’s *Tough Guide to Fantasyland* does the same thing for fantasy clichés.

[Writing-World.Com](#)

This contains essays and commentaries on various genres of writing, not just SF/Fantasy, and indeed not just fiction. There are useful hints for character and story development, research, how to make use of it (and when to stop!) and background information on placing work once it’s finished.

[Television Tropes & Idioms](#)

This one comes with a warning: have a friend or relative come in a couple of hours later and make you stop. It’s dangerously addictive – even the website suggests that after “a while,” you...*Look down at the bottom right corner of your screen. (That's top right for Mac users.) If you aren't thinking, “Oh God, I should have been in bed 6 hours ago and I have work/class in the morning,” you're doing it wrong.*