

Ten Steps to Better Fiction **by Robena Grant**

While I can't claim any of these words of wisdom as my own, neither can I tell you exactly who they all came from. All I know is more talented authors than myself wrote them. People like **James N. Frey** (How to Write a Damn Good Novel) or **Jack M. Bickham** (The 38 Most Common Fiction Writing Mistakes) or my favorite teacher at UCLA Extension, **Stephanie Waxman**, who taught me everything I know about layering and sensual detail.

You see, over the years I collected these writing pearls and jotted them down in journals, sometimes giving credit, sometimes not. Mostly I just typed them up, or wrote them on Post-Its, and then sticky-taped them to my computer until they became so tattered I finally peeled them off and put them into my top drawer. I recently cleaned my desk and found this ball of sticky-taped messages. I realized there were some real pearls and separated the mess and thought I'd share. I decided to put them into some semblance of order and this is what resulted:

1. **ACTION**: creates conflict and drives emotion. Emotion stems from internal motivation, for example, heartache, shame, guilt, trust, regret.
2. **WORK** from the **INSIDE** out: show the characters deep motivation peeling away the layers and exposing the deepest darkest fears.
3. **WORK** from the **OUTSIDE** in: show how the character walks, talks, dresses, the social mask they wear.
4. **SHOW** the strengths of your H/H. They must both accomplish things through character, intellect, strength, curiosity, risk taking. Pearl from **Jennifer Crusie** (Fast Women, Bet Me, Don't Look Down, written with **Bob Mayer**): Remember whose head you're in, because that's whose character your building, remember where this is taking place, remember to keep it in real time.
5. **USE** guy shorthand: no girlie talk allowed.
6. **THINK** of each chapter as a mini book: no dull openings, non-hook endings, or wimpy transitions.
7. **SCENE & SEQUEL**: follow advice from **Deb Dixon** (G.M.C. Goal, Motivation & Conflict.) Ask the three questions of each scene. Why is it here? What does it show? Is it necessary to promote the story? Does at least one aspect of your scene show goal, motivation, or conflict? The other two aspects must either advance story, plot, or character development.
8. **RAISE** the **STAKES**: build small details and make them progressively larger by layering them as an ongoing thread throughout your story.
9. **ALLOW** nothing coincidental, or contrived. No simple misunderstanding.
10. **NO SUMMARY** within a scene, do not break up the action.

Favorite quotes:

James N. Frey: The mathematics of novel writing, or to get there: keep plugging, even if you've got a hangover.

James M. Bickham: *Whatever* your circumstances, as a writer of fiction you need to be continually involved in the writing process.

Fellow Aussie, **Bryce Courtenay**: He with the best bum glue wins.

So seat yourself in your favorite chair, glue yourself to it if necessary, heed all of the pearls of wisdom above, and write!