

The official newsletter  
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a professional organization  
of writers of popular fiction



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# *Nink* July 2020

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# President's Voice

*By Tawdra Kandle*



As we enter the seventh month of 2020, I was thinking the other day that we're halfway through—phew! Relief! Sometimes, it feels as though this year could not get any worse. But a friend reminded me that if we take a broader, longer view of time, we realize that every year, every decade, has its own challenges and bright spots. I'm trying to remember that more often.

In the middle of February (can you remember that far back?), all of us involved in planning the NINC2020 Conference were very excited. We'd already had to increase our room block at the Tradewinds Resorts in St. Pete twice. Almost all of the Featured Guest Speakers we had invited had said yes. Registrations were pouring in, and we were on target for a sell-out conference. We had some fabulous new ideas.

And then came March.

I know that almost all of our NINC members have been waiting to hear the final decision on the conference this September. I'm well aware of this because so many of you are emailing or messaging me or posting about it on social media or in the NINC Loop. I understand. We all have plans to make or to adjust, and we want to have the best information before we do that. Many of us have seen other events that we were scheduled to attend shift to a virtual format.

The board promised to make our announcement on or before July 15th. We decided that this column is the best venue to let you know what's happening, because it allows me to address some questions I am sure you will have. *Please read this entire column. If you have questions that are not answered here, please see our FAQ page.*

**As of this writing, the NINC2020 Conference will be held live and in-person at the Tradewinds Resort in St. Pete Beach, Florida on September 23-27.**

Why did we make this decision? To understand, you might need a little background on how conference planning works. We have contracts with our hosting hotel (The Tradewinds) for several years into the future. Signing contracts for future events gives us certain benefits and advantages. In those contracts, NINC commits to two major promises: one, that we will fill a certain block of rooms, and two, that we will buy a minimum dollar amount of food and beverages. This is how the hotel makes its money.

When we sign the contracts, we agree that if we do not meet our end of the bargain, there are financial penalties. Those penalties increase the closer we get to the time of the event.

In these contracts, there is also something called a *force majeure*. It protects us in the event that we cannot fulfill our end of the contract because of forces of nature (hurricanes), or acts of terrorism, war or God. In order for this *force majeure* to go into effect, certain criteria must be met which simply are not present at this time.

Since mid-March, we've been in touch with the conference reps at the Tradewinds. Our contact at the hotel advised our conference liaison to wait until later in the year to discuss what will happen in September, as the future was uncertain and the hotel was not able to address concerns with any accuracy at that time.

On June 1, I met with the director of catering and the VP of sales at the Tradewinds. We discussed all of our options. What it came down to was this: the government of the state of Florida is moving ahead with opening businesses and allowing businesses like hotels and restaurants to conduct business as usual. There are no mandated travel restrictions. Consequently, at this point in time, our *force majeure* cannot be enacted. If we canceled our conference, the financial penalties would be astronomical.

While I understand that this is not an optimal situation, and the health of our members continues to be our principal concern, it is also incumbent upon the board to be aware of the tremendous fiscal ramifications of canceling the in-person conference at this time. NINC will suffer few if any penalties for a much smaller event (the hotel is waiving most penalties related to lower numbers). We will continue to monitor what's happening in Florida closely, and if anything should change that indicates we must cancel *and* allows us to do so with minimal penalties, we will.

What does this mean for you?

If you are registered to attend the conference and you still plan to attend, you don't have to do anything. If you haven't reserved your hotel room, please do so. Below, I will share details on the resort's cleaning/distancing/safety protocols. [If you have any questions, you can visit our FAQ page on our website.](#)

If you are registered for the conference and you feel you should not attend, you can cancel anytime between now and August 31, 2020, and receive a full refund (minus Stripe fees of \$15). [To cancel, please fill out this form.](#) We will cancel your registration, refund your fee and also cancel your room with the hotel. **If you have any qualms about your safety and welfare in regard to conference attendance, [please cancel your registration.](#)** NINC and the Tradewinds will do everything within our power and according to the best information we have at the time to keep people safe and healthy, but we cannot make any guarantees. As you probably know, our understanding of COVID-19 is evolving, and we are all doing the best we can.

If you have been waiting to see what we are going to do before you made a decision, you can still register for the conference up until August 31st. [You can do that here.](#)

I know there has been a lot of chatter about the possibility of a virtual conference. At this time, we have no plans to present a virtual NINC conference in 2020. If something were to change in that regard, it would require an entirely new registration process, so please do not delay in canceling your registration if you are sure you will not attend in person. To reiterate, **your NINC2020 Conference registration is not transferable to a virtual conference, in the event that a virtual conference were to happen.**

The Tradewinds shared with me what they are doing to help keep guests safe. I've listed them below, but if you have a question that is not addressed, please visit our FAQ page.

- The shuttle that operates between the airport and the hotel goes directly to the Tradewinds with no extra stops. The driver will be wearing a mask, and the vehicles are sanitized between guests. We are asking the shuttle to enforce mask-wearing for guests, too.
- Check-in at the hotel is limited to one person per party, with only one guest at the desk at the time. The line for check-in requires six feet social distancing.
- Workshop rooms have been reconfigured in keeping with social distancing standards. Each row has fewer chairs, and rows are eight feet apart.
- Each workshop room will be sanitized between sessions, using not only surface disinfectant but also a specialty atmosphere cleaning machine.
- The water station in workshop rooms will have a hand sanitizer next to it along with gloves for your use.
- Hand sanitizer stations will be located throughout the hotel.
- Elevator occupancy is limited to four people.
- Guest rooms are completely sanitized, linens (including covers) sent out for cleaning. For stays of three days or less, there will be no housekeeping (although towels and other needs will be available). For stays of longer than three days, the guest may opt to have the housekeeper come in when the guest is not in the room.
- Tables at our meals will be spaced six feet apart. Each table will approach the buffet on its own. At the buffet, there will be masked and gloved servers at each dish who will serve, so diners will never touch the utensils.
- We are moving as much of our event outside as possible.

As an event, we are going to eliminate the use of paper programs and will be using an app instead. We will also reduce contact during registration to a bare minimum (name tag pick-up only). We will require the wearing of masks at all times during workshops, meetings and sessions.

*If you have questions that are not answered here, please see our FAQ page.*

I understand that this decision is going to disappoint many people who were registered for the conference (or not) and hoped that it would be presented virtually. Please be assured that we have not made any decisions without a great deal of thought, discussion and weighing of all options.

I'm well aware that cases of Coronavirus are spiking in Florida. I live in the state, so the news of what's happening is all around me. However, the governor has not indicated that the state will close again in the near future. We have to proceed under the assumption that he will not mandate closure.

Is this year going to be the same kind of conference as we're used to enjoying? No. We expect less than half of our normal attendance. There are some parts of the conference that we simply cannot make happen in 2020. We'll update you on what those are as we go through the rest of the planning process.

We'll miss the members, guests and industry friends who won't be in St. Pete, but we plan to make the best of what we can do for everyone who is able to join us.

Thank you for your patience and understanding during these challenging times. If you have questions not answered here or [on our FAQ page](#), then [please go here to contact us for further information](#).

—Tawdra Kandle

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*Tawdra Kandle is a USA Today best-selling romance author with over 80 books released. Her titles include new adult and adult contemporary romance; under the pen name Tamara Kendall, she writes paranormal romance, and under the pen name Tessa Kent, she writes erotic romance.*

## About NINC

NINC remains committed to serving all of our members, regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, religious/spiritual beliefs if any, ability, nationality or age. It is NINC's desire and goal to make sure that every author member feels welcomed and accepted and heard.

## About *Nink*

*Nink's* goal is to provide our readers with high-quality articles that offer critical business advice, marketing how-tos, advanced craft coaching, or strategy to continue building a career, all geared to established authors. All members should feel confident that *Nink* provides something for them. We welcome pitches and submissions from all members; [propose an article](#) or submit a [letter to the editor](#).

## NINC Member Benefits

Don't forget to sign up for the [email loop](#), [critique/brainstorming group](#), and the members-only [Facebook group](#) if you haven't already. The Pro Services Directory, member [discount page](#), and [sample letters](#) are also great resources.

Missing a newsletter? Past issues can be found [here](#).

## Accessing the NINC website

Not sure how to log in to the NINC website? Visit the login page here: <https://ninc.com/membership-overview/login-to-ninc/>



September 23 - 27, 2020



- **Conference information:** <https://ninc.com/conferences/about-the-ninc-conference/>
- **Conference Registration:** <https://ninc.com/conferences/registration/>
- **Conference e-loop:** <https://groups.io/g/BeachNINC2020/>



## From the Editor

*By Michele Dunaway*



This issue marks a turning point. Not only are we over halfway through the year in terms of newsletters, but we are in the final issues of my term as your editor. So for July and August, the production team and I wanted to try something a little different. Instead of running what could easily be a series of two or more articles across multiple months, like we've previously done with multiple authors, we've decided to run all articles in the series during the same month for a longer feature approach. So this month, July, you will see two articles on tarot cards, and in August we'll do the complete gift-giving series (along with some submitted recipes). Anyway, we simply wanted to mix it all up a bit and try something new. Hope your summer is going well for those of you in the northern hemisphere.

—Michele

P.S. You asked for higher end craft pieces and Joanna Grant, who is now coaching writers, delivered on how to analyze and fix your saggy middle. If you have other craft topics you'd like a former executive editor to tackle, please email those suggestions to me at [ninkeditor@gmail.com](mailto:ninkeditor@gmail.com).

# Be Your Own PR Person, Part Three

## Writing your own story

*By Michele Dunaway*



In the previous installments of this series, we worked on the idea of your “Home Base” or your key message in May 2020, and then in June 2020 where the focus of your story should be—you—as stories are about people, not events. The whole idea behind this is that while you can hire a professional to do all this for you (and perhaps you do, depending on the level of your career), you can do much of the work yourself.

In this article, we’re going to focus on the actual crafting of your story for a press release, and how to hook your reader with your headline and first paragraph. As mentioned in Parts I and II, you can go to the internet and Google “press release samples” and dozens of images will pop up and tell you exactly what needs to go where. They’ll even tell you what you need to include and give you sample formats where you can slot your words right into the fields of headlines and body copy and contact information. If you Google “write a press release,” even more information pops up. Most of it, however, wants to sell you something. (I’ll have links at the bottom that don’t.)

Now that you know the story is about you, you should use the headline and the first paragraph to get the reader hooked and into your story. This is key, because no matter how interesting and different you are (which comes from your message map and distinguishing points), people are busy. Think of it this way: **Your press release is like a résumé. There are certain protocols that should be followed.**

It’s like when you have your book copy edited. Do you use [AP Style](#)? [Chicago Manual of Style](#)? Most newspapers and magazines use AP style, meaning that the number 10 is not written as ten, but one through nine are. Learning the small distinctions in style can mean the difference between your release being picked up or being deleted. In these days of press/media consolidations and cutbacks, the more you can have your press release in a format the media can use with few changes, the better.

## Headlines

Your press release should have a headline and it might have a sub-headline. If you look at a magazine, a primary headline could be something like “Books-a-Billion,” and a sub-headline could be “Online Sales for Top 100 Indie Authors Grows.”

Headlines usually contain subjects, verbs and omit articles like “a,” “an” or “the.”

However, your primary headline should contain all the needed information without being overwhelming or underwhelming.

Here’s an example of how I would work through this process:

*Underwhelming:*

Michele Dunaway Releases *His Burning Secret*

*Overwhelming:*

Best-selling Romance Author Michele Dunaway Releases Her 27th Book, *His Burning Secret*, June 15

*Just right*

Teacher by Day / Author by Night Michele Dunaway Releases 27th Book

So let’s look at each. The underwhelming first one does too little. No one cares about the title. Who am I? The overwhelming one is simply too much information. Again, the recipient doesn’t need to know all this. It’s boring. I don’t care.

The just right one teases the reader. “Teacher by Day / Author by Night” is what makes me different, so I’ve immediately given the reporter something different—the hook. I could further tweak it depending on where I’m sending it by doing this:

Teacher by Day / Local Author by Night Michele Dunaway Releases 27th Book

*Or*

Teacher by Day / Author by Night Michele Dunaway Releases St. Louis-Set 27th Book

Your headline, which is the first thing people read, and in many press release forms is typed in all caps, immediately needs to answer two questions: “Are you bored reading this?” and “Why should the reader care?” In Part I of this series published last month, this all boiled down to answering the simple question the consumer wants to know: “What’s in it for me?”

This is what your headline must do. (By the way, the generic “book” could be replaced with novel, or a more specific genre like thriller, romance, or mystery. Because romance is often seen wrongfully as “less than,” I want them to be hooked by the idea of local author, 27th book before they hit “romance.” I’m at least going to make them read a bit more before a discard.)

So let’s take the just right headline and add a subheadline to it.

Headline: Teacher by Day / Local Author by Night Michele Dunaway Releases 27th Book

Subhead: *His Burning Secret*, a Heroes of St. Louis firefighter romance, releases June 15

## The lead

The use of a subheadline is optional and could depend on the template you choose. Once the person receiving the release reads past your headline and/or subheadline, they encounter the story you write for them. Usually you want to give the recipient a *news lead*.

A news lead gives the 5Ws and H (who, what, where, why, when, and how). Using me as an example:

“Kirkwood resident Michele Dunaway celebrates the June 15 release of *His Burning Secret*, Book One in the Heroes of St. Louis contemporary romance series. Set in the world of the St. Louis Fire Department, Dunaway’s 27th release is available through Amazon Kindle, BN.com, and Apple Books.”

The news lead should generally be no longer than 50 words. In fact, most paragraphs should be no more than 50 words. This breaks up the long, black text, allowing the copy to breathe and not overwhelm the reader.

The news lead does the job immediately. It allows the person who gets your press release to push out a little blurb online or even add it to a calendar somewhere.

A *feature lead* teases the reader. The important information (that I’m releasing my 27th book June 15) might not appear until a bit later. Remember, stories are about people, not things or events. My release is an event. My book is a thing. I’m the story.

A good source for finding different types of leads is from my friend Bobby Hawthorne’s article at the [University Interscholastic League](#) (UIL).

Choosing the staccato style—which Hawthorne describes as “a series of jerky, exciting phrases, separated by dashes or dots, used if the facts of the story justify it”—I’m going with “Sexy St. Louis firefighters. A charity calendar. One romantic read.”

## Body copy

I can now put my staccato lead in front of my news lead and with a few tweaks have the following:

“Sexy St. Louis firefighters. A charity calendar. One hot romantic read debuting June 15 as Kirkwood resident Michele Dunaway releases *His Burning Secret*, Book One in the Heroes of St. Louis contemporary romance series. Set in the world of the St. Louis Fire Department, Dunaway’s 27th release is available through Amazon Kindle, BN.com, and Apple Books.”

So what next? That’s going to be up to you. Maybe I want a bit of my blurb:

“Dunaway wrote the book to be about second chances: after sparks fly as she photographs hunky fireman Joe Marino for the Sexy Public Servants Charity Calendar, Taylor Krebs can’t resist his charm or his proposition. He’ll help her drum up clients for her fledgling photography business, that is, if she helps him with his Burned Survivors book. But after getting hands-on while teaching Joe camera skills—and things heat up beyond hot and steamy—Taylor knows she must guard her heart; Joe might be a hometown hero, but he’s hiding a secret that could tear them apart.”

I could then follow it with a quote:

*"His Burning Secret* is one of my favorite books. I chose to set it in St. Louis because daily I hear news reports of how my city's firefighters put their lives on the line," Dunaway said. "I love my hometown and wanted to celebrate that."

You get the idea. Perhaps the quote follows the lead. Perhaps there are a few more paragraphs before the first quote. The key focus here is on you. Somewhere in your release you weave in your bio. Basically, you are writing your own story, one that the media could simply run without any changes if it chose.

## Finally

For more information on news and feature stories, the UIL has some great resources:

- [News leads](#) (5W & H breakdown)
- A PDF on [Writing the Feature Story](#)
- A PowerPoint on [Headline Writing](#)

UIL Feature handouts:

- [Structure of the Feature Story](#)
- [Different Kinds of Feature Stories](#)

Sample press releases put out by groups on their own websites:

- [UIL News](#)
- [Amazon Nora Roberts](#) (from 2011)

And the University of Kansas has a great [Community Tool Box](#) complete with examples. Go take a look.

Like with all writing, to get journalistic writing tight and concise will take revisions and revisions. Using the resources in this series, hopefully you are one step closer to being your own PR person, or if you hire one, knowing that they are doing the best job possible for you.

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*Michele Dunaway* released *His Burning Secret* on April 4. It was previously published by St. Martin's Press as *Burning for You*.

# How to Use the Tarot in Your Writing

*By Nicole Evelina*



We've all heard of tarot cards and seen them used by witches and fortune tellers in the movies and on TV. Unfortunately, the persistent use of them by Hollywood to evoke fear and evil has led to many people thinking the tarot is something it is not. Before we begin, I want to address some common tarot misconceptions:

1. **The tarot is not evil.** It is just a set of cards with pictures on them. That's it. A tarot deck is no more or less powerful than a regular deck of playing cards.
2. **It will not summon the devil or any evil spirits.** The tarot actually has nothing to do with any religion. You can choose for it to be part of your spiritual practice, but it doesn't have to be. The cards are neither positive nor negative; it is your intent that makes them one way or the other. You'd have to be very intentional and work really hard to summon anything evil with them. And I don't recommend trying.
3. **If you are Christian and you use it, you will not go to hell.** Well, you might, but not for that! In fact, there is even a book on how Christians can use the tarot called [Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism](#). I highly recommend it. There are also several [Christian tarot decks](#).
4. **You don't have to be religious to use it.** Even though divination using playing cards pre-dates modern psychology, tarot really is all about your subconscious mind, so you can be an atheist and it will work just the same as if you are religious.

If you're not comfortable with tarot or think it is wrong, by all means don't use it. I would never want you to do something that goes against your beliefs or makes you feel like you're doing something wrong. But if you're curious, read on.

## What the tarot is

So, if all of that is true, how exactly does the tarot work? The easiest explanation is that it is a way to tap into your subconscious mind, which holds a lot of information and answers we don't normally access with our conscious brains. As we know from dreams, our subconscious works in symbols, which is why there is standard symbolism on each tarot card, regardless of the specific artwork.

The tarot's symbolism is heavily based in archetypes because these are pretty much eternal and unchanging. The most common archetypes include:

1. The Hero who is undertaking the quest.
2. The Mentor who guides them.
3. The Ally who accompanies them.
4. The Herald who says "Hey, hero, it's time for a change in your life," and kicks off the quest.
5. The Trickster, who is the comic relief and mischief-maker.
6. The Shapeshifter, who is kind of like a frenemy and could be friend or foe or both.
7. The Wizard/Guardian who tests the hero
8. The Shadow, who is the villain.

If these roles sound familiar, that's because they are also the building blocks of storytelling. Each of these, and more, are reflected in the card's symbolism. More on that in a minute.

## The system of tarot and the major arcana

Every tarot deck is comprised of 78 cards divided into the major arcana (22 cards) and minor arcana (56 cards). The major arcana are like the face cards of a regular deck of playing cards. Major arcana cards are more significant and helpful in understanding your characters and plot because these cards represent powerful forces and events which can shape them. Major arcana cards can identify the major plot points of your book and the basics of your outline.

There are countless ways of interpreting these cards (here's a [good online resource](#)), so we'll take a brief look at each and how they might be used to indicate a character or plot point:



**The Fool** – This is the hero of our story, the unwitting innocent setting out on the journey of your book. He symbolizes being open to new possibilities and sometimes being foolish in your ignorance. If your hero is otherwise represented, he or she could be an ally to the main character. This person is usually well-intentioned, but can also be bungling.



**The Magician** – The magician symbolizes intelligence, talent, intuition, freedom and confidence, but he can also be a tricky showman. His message is that you already have everything you need to accomplish your goals. Depending on the story, he could be the mentor for your hero, the herald who kicks off the quest, a trickster or possibly the wizard who tests your hero. Study the surrounding cards for clues.



**The High Priestess** – She is a woman of great power and strength and symbolizes the inner voice or intuition. She also represents spiritual forces like wisdom and insight and is a wise counselor who may live at a remove from the rest of the world. She could also be the mentor of your main character or even the herald if used with prophecy or magic.





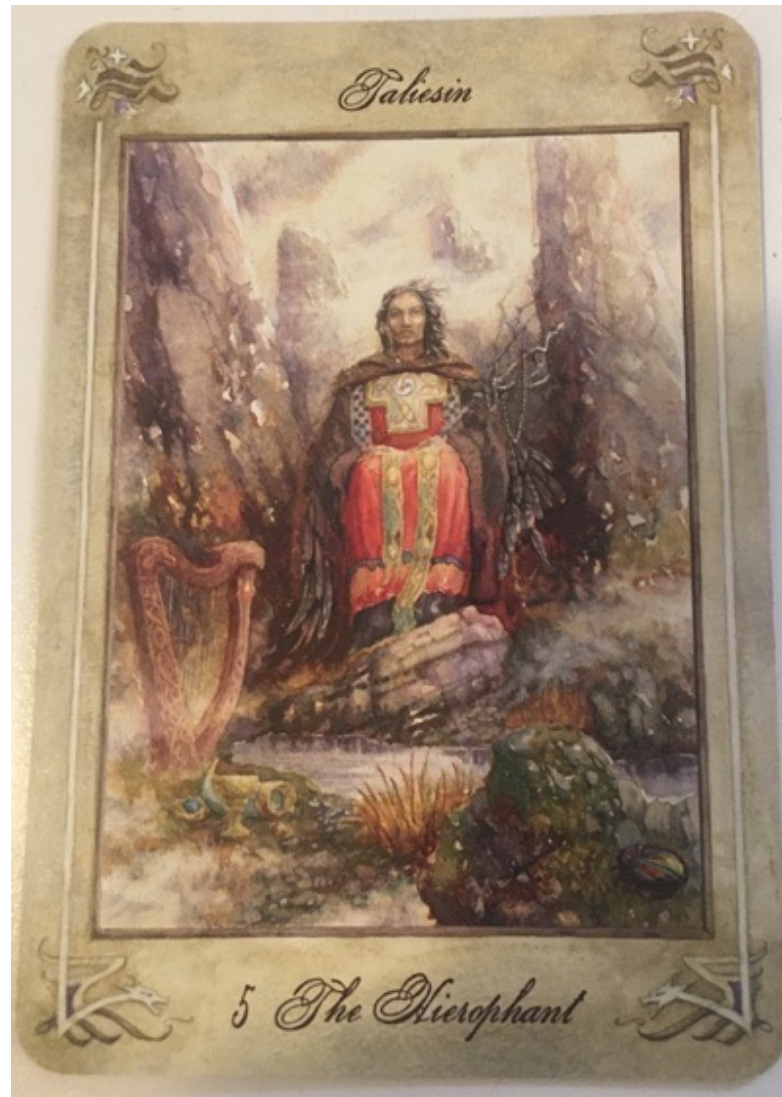
**The Empress** – She is the ultimate feminine figure and powerful ruler. She is a strong role model and peacemaker, a guide, and example of dignity. She is often associated with fertility and Mother Earth. Another mentor possibility, but she could also take her power too far and become a dark figure.



**The Emperor** – This is the card of hard-won leadership and power, an authority figure who knows his stuff. He represents masculine energy that is stable, reasonable and ethical. He is another possible mentor figure, but he could also be seeking to hold your hero down, just like some rulers seek to oppress their people.



**The Hierophant/Priest** – This figure represents tradition, authority and adherence to established rules and customs. He is also a powerful spiritual force and you would do well to listen to his wisdom. It's possible this card could represent the mentor, but depending on the circumstances, he could also be the shapeshifter or even the shadow. He would be a fun villain to write and would pose a formidable challenge for your hero, who is usually seeking to overthrow all he represents.





**The Lovers** – The lovers are all about relationships, and not necessarily just sexual ones, friendships too. They also guide values and decisions and symbolize intense emotions such as the blindness and irrationality of love. They often appear in reading when a decision is needed and can indicate a positive past choice. This card could be the ally who helps the heroine in her journey or could represent a love interest or romantic aspect to the plot.





**The Chariot** – Represents triumph, victory and success and is connected to natural drive and determination. But the Chariot warns you can't just depend on your dreams; you must take action to make them happen. As such, this is a card of agency for a character and movement/momentum in the plot.



**Strength** – This card is all about inner strength—fortitude of heart and mind that enables you to overcome any obstacle. It also symbolizes perseverance and facing your fears head on. A character with this card would be strong, but could also be stubborn, which could lead to difficulties with other characters or obstacles in the plot that the hero will have to fight to overcome.



**The Hermit** – As his name implies, the Hermit represents solitude and listening to the voice within. He could be the guide to your hero, or he could be the trickster, falsely urging them to withdraw when action is required, depending on the surrounding cards. If he comes out of isolation to set up the quest, he can also function as the herald. He represents a place in the plot where introspection is needed before the hero can make a decision/move on.



**Wheel of Fortune** – This the wheel of fate, representing the ups and downs of life. The card reminds us that the only permanence in life is change and that we must be open to learning the lessons of the present moment. Usually it is interpreted as a card of good luck, but depending on the surrounding cards, it could also indicate a reversal of fortune. It is a good card for plotting points of major change or evaluating how your character handles it.





**Justice** – As the name implies, this card is about karma and getting what you deserve. If that is a main theme in your book, pay close attention to this card. It can also be about acting as a judge and weighing choices in order to make a decision or needing to be impartial. This card could indicate a character who is judgmental (or who teaches others not to judge) or it could represent a moment your main character is called to account for their actions, either within their own mind or by someone else.



**The Hanged Man** – The hanged man is all about being stuck or being in the in-between. He usually represents needing to make a decision or being at a crossroads in life. Usually a sacrifice is required to be able to move on. This card can also mean punishment for a crime. This card can represent where your character is before he/she takes up the call for change at the beginning of a book or any point where they feel unable to move forward. In the latter case, look at surrounding cards to see who or what might be able to help propel them forward.



**Death** – This card does not usually mean literal death! It can, in rare cases, but usually instead represents transformation, the dying of the old so the new can be reborn. It can indicate the end of a cycle or the end of relationship and can symbolize your fears or even the end of suffering. As such it is versatile in revealing a character's weakness and vulnerabilities, but can also be used to point to change in a story.





**Temperance** – As the name indicates, this is a card of moderation. Patience is her virtue and she can represent grace under pressure, good manners, the ability to adapt or be creative. She is symbol of balance and harmony. She can represent an advocate or ally or your character, or a warning not to get out of control.



**The Devil** – **This card is not evil**, no matter what Hollywood says. When you are using tarot for writing, this card will usually indicate your shadow or villain character, or forces working against your main character. It represents our baser instincts and can symbolize obsession, abuse and addictions. It can also symbolize a positive character embracing their wild or vengeful side or feeling trapped.

You will notice that in my deck this card is called The Horned One. That is because it is a deck based on pagan mythology and pagans do not recognize the existence of the Christian devil, much less worship him. The iconography of the traditional devil comes from the ancient horned gods.



**The Tower** – This card is not a fun one to see in a reading because it represents destruction and major change. But that isn't always bad; it can mean the breaking down of the old to begin anew, as in a desired divorce. Usually the best solution is to give in and then pick up the pieces and start over. This often appears to represent the “black moment” in a plot—the point where all seems lost for the hero.



**The Star** – The star represents hope, peace and freedom, inspiration and enlightenment. It can mean relying on yourself and taking steps to improve yourself or your situation. It also symbolizes healing and following your destiny or the will of the gods. For characters, it can mean agency or following a force greater than themselves.





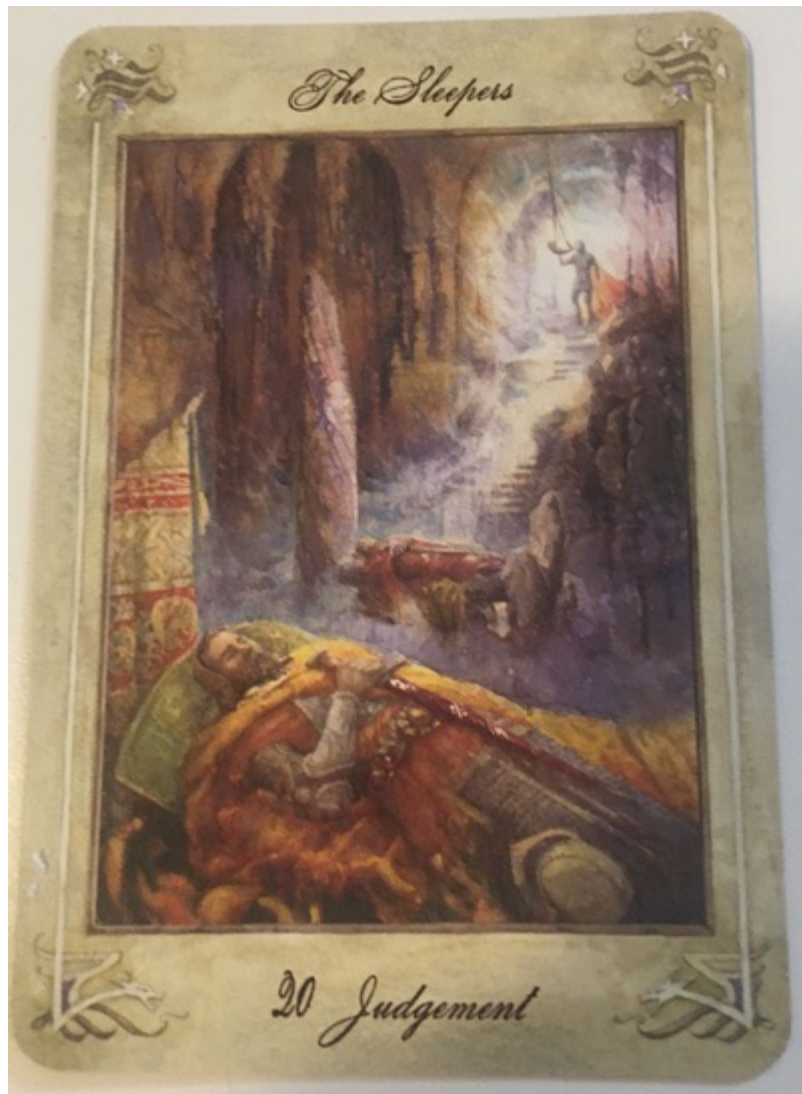
**The Moon** – Just as the moon rules the tides and can affect human sanity, this card represents powerful emotions and vivid dreams. It can mean a time of disorientation, anxiety or repressing things into your subconscious. Because it can indicate a shadowy person or situation, insanity or obsession with the macabre, it can represent your villain or something involving deception that will happen to your hero. Or it can mean something underhanded he or she is doing, willingly or not.



**The Sun** – This card is the opposite of the Moon. It indicates things done out in the light of day, triumph and victory, glory, safety and well-being. It can also represent the innocence and joy of childhood. It is an uplifting card that indicates all is well in the world. In characterization, it is associated with genuinely good, innocent people, like Forrest Gump, for example.



**Judgement** – Like the Last Judgement (which is often depicted on the card) it represents resurrection and rebirth, a reawakening and new opportunities. It can also symbolize a rite of passage, a positive change, or a new way of thinking. In plotting a book, this card would naturally fall between or at the beginning or end of an act or section because that is where major changes occur.





**The World** – This card represents seeing beyond oneself into the interconnectedness of all things. It represents mystical insight and faith and being in control of one's fate. You are exactly where you are meant to be. In character development, this would be a very confident character who understand their destiny and is actively seeking it. In plotting, it could represent a happy ending or being ready to move on to something new.



## The minor arcana

The minor arcana are like the numbered suit cards in a deck of playing cards. They are evenly divided into four suits, with ten regular cards and four face cards: the prince/page, knight, queen, king. While the major arcana represent the “big” things in life, the minor arcana fill in the humdrum, daily details and can be especially helpful in fleshing out the outline that major arcana cards give you.

The suits all have different symbolism:

1. **Wands/staves/staffs** – associated with the element of air and the ideas of movement and growth. Wands represent ideas, creativity, hopes and dreams. My experience with readings heavy on this suit are usually positive, but variable. Like the wind they represent, they are changeable and sometimes fickle.
2. **Cups** – associated with the element of water and your mental and spiritual state, as well as your relationships. Cups are highly emotional and can be either positive or negative, depending on the surrounding cards.
3. **Swords** – associated with the element of fire and with conflict. Like a blade, they can be sharp and deliver messages we don’t really want to hear, especially about our health and relationships. They can be harbingers of ill tidings, but they can also make us face realities we want to deny, leading to wisdom and healing. I cringe when I see a reading heavy on swords because they are generally negative cards, unless you work really hard to find the silver lining.
4. **Pentacles/coins/disks** – associated with the element of earth and the material world, primarily dealing with matters of money, career and all forms of prosperity: emotional, physical and spiritual. I have found that if your reading contains a lot of this suit, it will be generally positive.

Some people also read “reverse” cards, meaning a card laid upside down when dealt. Generally, that reverses the usual meaning of the card. Most books will provide you with both regular and reverse meanings for each card. I don’t personally read reverse cards because I think the tarot is complex enough without it.

Almost every tarot desk comes with a book, so if you don’t want to invest in additional materials when you’re first starting out, you don’t have to. Those books are enough to teach you the basics and help you to interpret the cards.

I suggest searching online (or if we’re out of quarantine by the time this is published, visiting your local New Age store) and seeing what decks speak to you. It’s usually wise to look at a deck in person and get a literal feel for it, but when that is not possible, this a [good place to start](#).

The classic tarot deck is the [Rider-Waite Tarot](#). (I don't personally like that deck; it freaks me out for some reason.) There a deck for literally every personality from [Victorian](#) to [Goth](#) to [faeries](#) and [unicorns](#), as well as every culture and sexual orientation. There are even decks to tie in with movies like [Lord of the Rings](#), TV shows like [Game of Thrones](#) and books like Erin Morgenstern's [The Starless Sea](#).

If you decide to purchase a deck, take some time to get to know the cards. Study each one and note what it says to you and it makes you feel. That's the first step to learning how to read them. Then, if the deck comes with a book, read it and study each card while reading its definition. Over time, you'll learn what to associate with each card.

One last note: If you aren't comfortable with tarot cards, you might want to consider oracle cards. These are similar to tarot, but they don't have the formalized structure around them that tarot does so they can be used in any way you want. I like them for single card readings. Many Christians also find these less daunting because they don't come with the stigma that tarot does. Here's an [article on the differences](#) and a [Christian-based list](#).

In case you're wondering what I use:

**Tarot:** I started with a basic set for beginners and then moved on to [Legend: The Arthurian Tarot](#). After a while, some of the cards became so associated in my mind with certain people who were no longer in my life that I couldn't read with that deck anymore. I bought the [Llewellyn Tarot](#) and have been using that for years now. I also own the [Mysteries of Mary](#) tarot.

**Oracle Decks:** I personally own several oracle decks, though I don't use them as much as my tarot cards: [Queen of the Moon Oracle](#), [Notes from the Universe on Abundance Cards](#), [The Wisdom of Avalon Oracle](#), [Archetype Cards](#), and the [Goddess Guidance Cards](#).

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*[Nicole Evelina](#) is not a professional tarot reader but has been reading for herself, her books and her friends for twenty years. And she still has a lot to learn.*

# Reading Tarot Spreads to Help With Your Writing

*By Nicole Evelina*



Now we're going to explore how to conduct a reading for your writing and venture into a few types of spreads you might like to use for different situations.

Before you read, you might like to find a quiet place where you can be alone with your thoughts and really think about what each card is trying to tell you. Have a notebook and pen or your computer handy so you can jot down ideas as they come to you. Some people choose to lay out a special cloth (usually a solid color) on which to place the cards because it helps focus the mind. If you are religious, you might want to ask your guardian angel or the muses or whatever god(s) you believe in to guide your reading, but that is totally optional.

To begin, take a deep breath and close your eyes. Think about your question. If you are using your reading to build out your plot from the beginning, you might ask a question like "What is the framework of this book?" or "Show me how this plot should progress." If you're trying to work through a block, think about it as specifically as you can, something like "what happens to X character next?" or "How does X get out of [name the jam you put them in]." If you are building a character you could start with "Show me X's progression throughout the book." Keep repeating your question in your mind over and over as you shuffle the deck. You'll know when to stop. Sometimes you will feel a card get hot or cold or your fingers will tingle. Other times, you just know to stop. Sometimes nothing at all happens and you just get tired of shuffling. Trust your instincts; there are no wrong answers. Once you feel ready, draw your first card from the top of the deck.

Because of their unique symbolism, you can always do readings using only the major or minor arcana cards if you want to. But I have found that using both major and minor arcana (which is the standard practice) gives you a more complete picture. There are three basic types of spreads, which I'll explain from the easiest to the most complex.

## **One card spreads**

This involves drawing a single card and is the fastest and easiest. It allows you to be very focused in your question and answer, but it also provides you with the least amount of

information because you don't have the influence of surrounding cards. But if you are in a hurry or just need a prompt to get you going, one is all you need. Potential uses:

**Getting to know your characters** – Draw a card for each major character in your plot. This will tell you a lot about them, since we each have a card that best symbolizes who we are. (Mine is Strength.) This is best determined over time through multiple readings when the same card keeps showing up over and over again, but can also be done with a single reading.

I recently did this for a book I was plotting. It was biographical historical fiction set in WWII Poland and the card I drew was the Knight of Wands. This card symbolizes someone clever, with a strong sense of humor who is good with words and has sound instincts and a gift for seeing things others may have missed. This describes my heroine (who was a real person) to a tee. Because of this card, I learned what key aspects of her personality to focus on when writing.





**Get to know the overall “vibe” of your book.** A single card can also tell you about the theme(s) of your book. As I was writing this article, I pulled a card for my latest project, another biographical historical, this one set in the colonial United States. My card was The Five of Wands. I was immediately struck by the image, which shows five people fighting with staves, because while my book was written in a single, first-person POV, there are multiple competing timelines and storylines to keep straight, so much so that I needed to make a chart.



The meaning of the card is competition and being obsessed with material things or as the book that came with the deck puts it: “Keeping up with the Joneses.” That is certainly relevant because there are many men competing for the affection of my heroine. She also a very well-to-do woman who was known historically for her lavish parties and spending that, combined with her husband’s gambling, eventually drove them deep into debt. The card can also mean a clash of ideas and principles and hurting others by giving mixed messages. My main character is in

love with her sister's husband and both are tempted to have an affair. Much of their relationship takes place via letter and because of that, they often wonder what the other really feels.

(While I was writing this, I accidentally knocked the next card off the top of the deck. It was The Lovers, which is what I was expecting the main card for the book to be, because it is essentially a story of forbidden love. Always pay attention when cards fall out of the deck as you shuffle or otherwise make themselves known—it happens for a reason.)



**Find the answer to a plot problem or writer's block.** All you have to do here is ask what the problem is. Pay close attention to what the card symbolizes. It may tell you where you've gone wrong plotting in another part of the book, directly answer your question, or even tell you about something in yourself that is causing the block (such as being overworked and needing to take a break).



### Three-card spreads

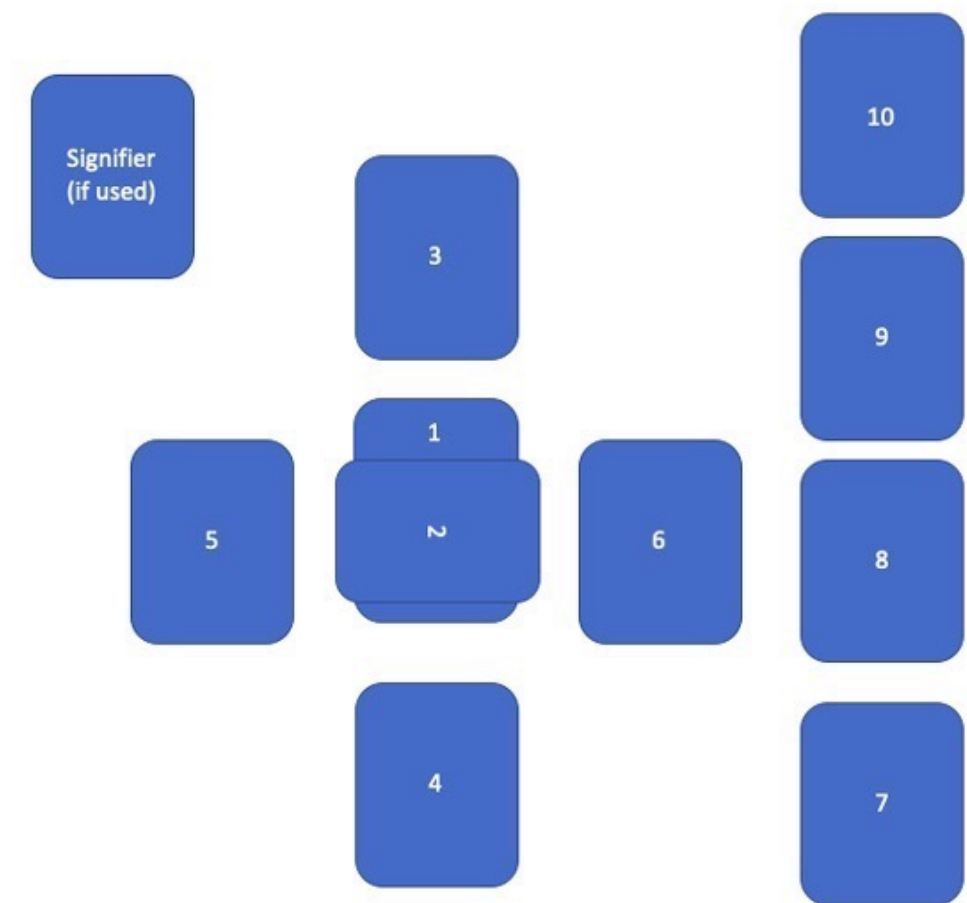
There are many variations on three-card spreads, but the most common is past-present-future, which can be used for both plots and characters.

- If you write to a three-act structure, you could use this spread to learn about the themes of each act.
- You could take each of your major characters and do a past-present-future spread to learn about their backstory, where they are when the book begins, and how they change as the novel progresses.
- For character arcs, think about one card as being where the character is now, the second as where they want to be, and the third how to get there.
- If you are experiencing a writing problem, you can have one card symbolize the nature of the problem, one the cause, and one the solution. Similarly, you can have the cards stand for what the character wants/what will help them, what is standing in their way, and how to overcome it.
- We've all heard about MRUs (motivation reaction units), right? One card can be your character's thought/feeling, one their reaction, and the third, what he or she is going to say or do in response.
- If you are mulling over the relationship between characters you could have one card stand for each character and the third for their relationship. Or you could use one for what brought them together, one for what pulls them apart, and the third for the resolution. (This one is particularly good for romance novels and romantic plotlines.)

You could seriously go on forever with these. There's a long list of [three-card spreads](#) online here.

## The Celtic Cross Spread

This is the classic tarot spread, the one you've seen in every TV show and movie with a fortune teller and the one you will see if you go visit one in real life. This is because it is the most comprehensive. I'm going to explain it first, and then show you a few ways to use it.



The Celtic Cross spread involves 10 or 11 cards. Some people choose to designate one card that is set off to the side to symbolize the question or the person asking the question. If you choose to do this, you will draw that card first after you have finished shuffling the deck. Then draw the cards from the top of the deck and lay them out according to the pattern above.

Once you've done that. Take a look at the overall spread. Is your gut telling you anything? Does the spread feel inherently happy or sad, positive or negative? Does anything immediately jump out at you? It can take some time to develop the ability to get the "feel" for a spread, so don't worry if you don't come up with anything right away.

Next, take a look at each card individually. Write down your impressions of each one. I did a reading for my colonial American book while writing this using the question "show me what I need to know about X book" and I'll give you my cards as well as an example.



My overall impression is that this is a positive reading with five major arcana cards (which is a lot) and no dominant suit (two swords and two pentacles, which neutralize each other's negative and positive elements). It's going to be an interesting reading.

1. **Relationship to the present situation** – Queen of Swords – An impressive, trailblazing woman of courage and intelligence who will not be held down by convention. This is my main character very clearly summed up.
2. **Positive forces in your favor** – The Chariot – Triumph, balance, holding opposing views in equal tension. Enjoying life. This describes my character's approach to life pretty well, though she's more known for extravagance than balance.
3. **Message from your higher self** – Queen of Pentacles – Female strength and success in business and with money. A caring woman concerned with the lives of those around her. Again, you have to trust me that this fits my character very well.
4. **Subconscious/underlying themes/emotional** – The Priestess – Inspiration and advice from a woman who is wise and mature. Can also represent isolation. That last part is interesting to me because my heroine spends most of the book in another country than the rest of her family. Her best friend could easily be represented by the priestess and would provide calm to her boundless energy.

5. **The past** – The Fool – Setting off on a journey unaware of an uncaring of the consequences; innocence and foolishness. My character married very young and regrets it almost immediately when her husband turns out not to be who she thought he was (quite literally) and she falls in love with someone else, but can't have him because she is already married.
6. **Relationship with others** – The Two of Cups – The minor arcana card most like The Lovers. Represents relationships, attraction, engagement/marriage and emotional bonds. Perfect for describing the forbidden love she experiences for most of her life.
7. **Psychological states/forces that can affect the outcome** – The Six of Swords – Ugh, the swords. Movement, alignment of heart and mind, a declaration of love, focus and follow-through with unpredictable results. Funny that this one depicts a journey across water because my character travels back and forth between America and Europe a lot. Again, I see shades of the forbidden romance in this card, especially since it comes right between the Two of Cups and The Sun.
8. **Environment/unseen forces** – The Sun – Triumph, bounty, enjoying life. It is interesting that the book that comes with this deck mentions "summer love" in connection to this card. If my two historical people ever actually consummated their affair, it would have been during a particular summer while his wife was away.
9. **Hopes and fears** – The Magician – A man of creativity, power and strong voice who is eloquent and charming. This could be my hero and describe what my heroine sees in him. This card can also mean someone who is manipulative and at times untrue, which applies to her fears about him just being a flirt and not really loving her since she is already married. (Which is something historians haven't even figured out.)
10. **Outcome** – The King of Pentacles – A proud, self-assured young man of status and wealth, a supportive husband who recognizes the value of culture. This card could represent either her husband or her lover. Her husband is proud and wealthy, but he is not exactly supportive, while her lover is. I see this as the outcome she wants; her ideal man. Unfortunately, he does not exist and history does not bear out a happy ending for her or her lover. However, as a writer, I see this as an opportunity to really amp up the tragedy of the ending. Outcomes are even more powerful when the hero and heroine don't get what they want because readers have been rooting for them the entire book and now will mourn with them as well.

Finally, look at the cards in groups of three or four. Do they affect each other or change the meaning of surrounding cards? Make notes of anything that notice. Again, it may take time to learn this part. In my example, as you can see from the explanations above, the first four cards agree with each other and strengthen one another in a description of my heroine. In the same way, cards six through nine all play on the same theme of forbidden love. Taken together, these influenced my interpretation of the Outcome card.

Of course, everything is subject to interpretation; I may read a spread totally differently than you do, which is why some people don't put any stock in tarot readings. And that is fine.

I'm only here to advise you on how you can use them as a tool in your writing; whether or not you believe they will work for you is a personal decision.

Once you get comfortable with your cards you can also make up your own spreads to fit your questions. They can be circular, triangle, any shape that works for what you need. You could even take the major archetypes and draw a card for each one or take your favorite plot arc or character arc tool (I'm a fan of Michael Hauge's "[Six Stage Plot Structure](#)" and Larry Brooks' [Four Part Structure](#)) and make up a spread to fit it. The sky is the limit.

I hope this series of articles has given you a new tool in your writing toolbox. If you are familiar with other systems of divination like runes, wisdom sticks, or even astrology or dowsing with a pendulum, you can employ those as well. They all tap into your subconscious mind in a similar manner. Best of luck!

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*Nicole Evelina* hopes to one day design two of her own tarot decks – one relating to her Guinevere series and one with Catholic saints – but she can't draw to save her life. Anyone want to illustrate? She is actually enjoying quarantine because she is not a people person.



# Lifestyle Brands

## Next level trademarks

*By Mindy Klasky*



Hey! Author! What's your brand?

In general, authors are increasingly sophisticated about branding. Many of us use slogans, taglines for our websites and emails. We have logos—general ones for our websites and specific ones for our series. We use trademarks such as series names to convey the source of our books. We use color schemes and fonts and designs of book covers and websites to make ourselves recognizable to our readers.

But few authors have conquered the next frontier in branding: becoming a lifestyle brand for their readers.

### What is a lifestyle brand?

A lifestyle brand embodies the values of a specific culture or community for marketing purposes. While a simple trademark indicates the source, sponsorship, or origin of a product, a lifestyle brand goes further, inspiring and motivating consumers.

Nike is a classic lifestyle brand. Its familiar “swoosh” logo and its slogan **Just Do It** do more than connote the manufacturer of a T-shirt or a pair of shoes. Instead, Nike inspires its customers to compete, to rise above ordinary limitations and to achieve the impossible every day.

Similarly, Southwest Airlines embodies the notion of a lifestyle brand. Expanding on its start at Dallas's Love Field airport, the low-cost, no-frills airline incorporates “love” into its marketing, from a heart logo on its planes to heart-shaped swizzle sticks for drinks. That “love” is further conveyed for customers through the airline's forgiving cancellation fees and luggage checking fees. Even the in-flight magazine is filled with empathetic stories advancing the notion of Southwest as an airline that cares for its customers.

As a result of their extreme enthusiasm, lifestyle brand consumers are more likely to remain loyal, regardless of the price of their beloved goods. Therefore, most lifestyle brands convey a

sense of luxury—or a thrifty aversion to luxury. In addition to Nike and Southwest, popular lifestyle brands include Apple, Lululemon, and Mrs. Meyer's.

Lifestyle brands create such an emotional connection that their consumers are often described as members of a “cult.” For example, one of the most popular blogs about Apple products is online at [cultofmac.com](http://cultofmac.com), and thousands of articles reference Apple products, Apple founder Steve Jobs, and cultish behavior.

### **Can people be a lifestyle?**

Individual people can successfully market themselves as lifestyle brands. For example, Oprah Winfrey has a cult following, willing to follow her from television to movies and from magazines to bookstores. Similarly, Gwyneth Paltrow has crafted a lifestyle brand that transcends her career in film.

As with Nike and Southwest Airlines, these individuals promote a way of life. Oprah inspires her followers to realize their potential, repeatedly asking her viewers, readers, and followers to define their own dreams and develop plans for achieving them. Gwyneth fosters a more introspective inquiry, urging her followers to explore the mind-body connection. Both of these women guide their followers to a more complete, more satisfying life, with the not-so-incidental endorsing of products along the way.

Neil Gaiman is one of the few authors who has achieved this status. Gaiman writes in a wide range of genres, inspiring his dedicated followers to follow him from graphic novels to adult novels to middle-grade books to children's picture books to retellings of Norse myth. His public appearances are mobbed by faithful readers who wait in line for up to ten hours for his signature. Avid fans permanently tattoo themselves with references to Gaiman's books. For several years, he has sold out events styled as “An Evening with Neil Gaiman,” where entertainment takes the form of whatever interests him at the moment—songs, dramatic readings from his books for adults or children, or simply answering pre-submitted questions from the audience. Gaiman isn't promoting a specific book; rather, he's promoting *himself*.

Arguably, authors' characters can become lifestyle brands as well. Ian Fleming's MI6 agent, James Bond, has been portrayed by six different actors in two dozen movies. Regardless of the specific image on the screen, the suave character's luxury tuxedo, martini, and high-end cars become aspirational for avid fans. That enthusiasm persists even though Bond himself does not exist.

### **Can a lifestyle brand be crafted?**

Sadly, there's no exact formula for developing a lifestyle brand. (If there were, of course, every trademark owner in the world would apply it, basking in the power and prestige of cultishly devoted fans.) There are, however, some marketing methods that make “lifestyle” status more likely:

- **Focus on the reader.** How can you, the author, make your readers' lives better? Can your books or your online presence answer questions, meet their emotional needs, or otherwise solve their problems? What community can you build for your readers? Can

you give them an online home, such as a Facebook group? What about a forum to communicate with you and with each other? What unique aspects of culture can you offer your reader? Can you develop a catch-phrase or slogan and offer it on merchandise? Can you foster inside jokes with a unique vocabulary in the places you share with your readers? Can you create merchandise for them to identify themselves and each other in public spaces?

- **Keep it simple.** At the same time that you're building solutions for your readers, remember to keep your presence simple. Use a logo, but keep that design as straightforward as possible. (Think of Nike's "swoosh" or Apple's line-drawing of a bitten piece of fruit!) Use a distinctive font, but be certain it's legible. You never want your fledgling community of fanatics to need to work hard to join you.
- **Maintain consistency.** Once you've identified your simple logos, fonts, and other trademarks, use them consistently. Maintain a uniform color scheme. Apply similar designs to all of your social media. Communicate frequently with your readers on a regular timetable—releasing books, sending newsletters, posting to social media, and reaching out in other regulated, predictable ways.
- **Reach out to influencers.** Every community has powerhouse members, people who enjoy an out-size effect on others. Some influencers can be courted with honest communication. Others are swayed by the offer of free books. Still others offer their influence for purchase, especially in the high-powered world of YouTube influencers. A high-powered influencer can be the difference between a merely successful brand and a powerhouse lifestyle brand.

## Dangers of lifestyle branding

Building a lifestyle brand requires a substantial investment of time, to study readers' behaviors and to develop solutions for their problems. It also requires a substantial investment in energy, to become consistently present in your readers' lives. Most lifestyle brands also invest substantial money in reaching their audience, purchasing advertisements wherever their followers are likely to be found.

In interviewing authors for this article, I uncovered another potential danger to lifestyle branding: alienating readers who perceive authors as being too wealthy. Multiple authors reported a negative response among their readers when the authors displayed cars, shoes, or other purchases that were perceived as luxury goods. The authors were chastised for charging too much for their books or for wasting time playing when they could be writing. The affected authors noted that upset readers did not have a similar reaction to actors, athletes, or musicians sharing similar high-end acquisitions; there seemed to be a negative reaction unique to authors' sharing.

(Of course, not all lifestyle brands connote wealth or luxury, and sharing one's high-end purchases is only one way to build a devoted community. Anecdotes from a subset of authors are not hard data. Older authors such as Danielle Steel and Jackie Collins certainly built careers as "glitzy" authors, with a flamboyant style. But contemporary authors might choose caution if they're building a luxury lifestyle brand.)

Building a lifestyle brand isn't easy. But with a focus on existing readers, a simple, consistent message, and the amplifier of community influencers, authors can build communities of dedicated readers that might make the leap to true "lifestyle" status.

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USA Today bestselling author [Mindy Klasky](#) learned to read when her parents shoved a book in her hands and told her she could travel anywhere through stories. As a writer, Mindy has traveled through various genres, including romantic comedy, hot contemporary romance, and traditional fantasy. In her spare time, Mindy knits, quilts, and tries to tame her to-be-read shelf.

# Maintaining Momentum

## Or how to avoid the dreaded saggy middle!

*By Joanne Grant*



An impactful opening will hook your reader and quite rightly, there is a lot of emphasis placed on writers to get those first chapters right. And then there's your ending. If you've done a great job, your ending will leave your reader feeling great about the time they've spent with your characters and are more likely to come back for more of your stories.

But what about everything in-between?

Whatever genre you're writing, whatever the word count, there's a lot of "in-between" that has to be just as engaging and memorable. After all, what's the point of that fantastic finale if few readers make it there! But I know that writers can struggle to maintain momentum through the mid-section and are in danger of developing a saggy middle.

In this article I will focus on the often-overlooked middle by highlighting common symptoms and causes, and then suggest some toning exercises.

### **What does a saggy middle look like?**

As a reader, you know when you're in saggy territory because you find yourself losing interest, skimming the pages, in short – you're bored! This could be because:

- There's nothing really happening – it's all a bit dull
- Or there's lots happening! It's all action and excitement, yet ... it leaves you feeling flat
- The narrative is confused, repetitious or waffley

What is going on? The chances are — not a lot. And there sits the problem. You're wading through a sludge of filler because nothing significant is happening to move the story forward in an engaging, meaningful way. This is key:



- Every scene, within every chapter, should be moving the story forward. Whether through plot, character motivation, emotions, conflicts, character development — something should be shifting, moving, propelling the reader through.

Without this forward-moving momentum, the pace will stall, your middle will sag, and readers will start to lose interest.

You know what sagging middles feel like as a reader, but how can you recognize it as a writer? Or when you feel like it might be sagging but aren't sure? First, let's identify whether your mid-section is in trouble.

### **Signs you're developing a saggy middle**

- You've lost interest in writing your current story. In fact, your head may be half-way into a different story. If you're bored, your reader will be too!
- Your writing feels mechanical, you're losing your natural voice and spark, and everything you write seems to lack the energy you created in the opening.
- You find yourself checking your word count every half an hour (or more!), willing it to have magically shot up a few thousand so you can move on to the next exciting part of the story.
- Your characters are repeating themselves — in actions, thoughts or conversations. In fact, they have run out of new things to say to each other!
- You find yourself describing the mundane. It may be real life, but it probably isn't that interesting to read.
- You throw in some action — another sex scene, another fight — because, it's exciting ... isn't it?

Does any of this sound familiar? If so, your writing is displaying some of the symptoms of a saggy middle, but the good news is that there are ways you can tone it up!

### **Two exercises to tone up the middle**

#### *Scene by scene analysis*

We've established that every scene should be moving something along, so a good place to start is by looking scene by scene and asking: what purpose does this scene serve? Here are some elements to focus on:

- **Characters:** What have you learned about them? Have you revealed anything new to the reader, to another character or even to themselves? What has changed within them, or is the aim to show that they haven't/can't change?
- **Emotion:** Have the emotional stakes shifted? Have emotions changed in the scene — from hopeful to anxious; from insecure to content; from in love to feeling betrayed?
- **Conflicts:** Check your conflicts. If you haven't noted a change in the above two points, it is likely your characters have stalled in their development and character arc: perhaps

conflicts have been resolved too soon. This could also signal that the conflicts are simply not strong enough to sustain the story.

- **Plot:** What is happening in the external action of the story — has the plot progressed?
- **Repetition:** Is there any repetition of information, action, behavior from what has come before? Question whether the repetition is necessary — to emphasize a point, flag it as important to the reader — or is it just repetition with no purpose?

If you consider each of these elements and nothing has shifted from the beginning of the scene to the end of the scene in a meaningful way – then your scene is contributing to the sag, it is just filler dragging down the pace. However, just a note on some of those calmer scenes.

You may have a scene where everything is seemingly static and you can't decide if it should stay. A moment of calm in the story can be a welcome moment of relief – it provides a sense that everything is going to be fine after all. Such scenes have much more impact if the scene that follows has high drama, this becomes the purpose of the calm scene. The trick is not to linger too long in the calm otherwise the pace will drop. And it never hurts to plant a seed of doubt that all is not well to propel the reader on.

#### Identifying where the sag began

It is often not the middle's fault that it lacks tone – it really does get a bad reputation! Instead, the problem likely originated elsewhere so it's important to detect exactly where:

- Look at the chapters that came before. It may be that your opening doesn't have such strong foundations after all. What threads did you start that need continuing, what has been resolved too soon, or even forgotten about? Revisit your early chapters and check that your scenes have purpose here too.
- Think about your ending. You might find that you are meandering through the middle of the story because you're not quite sure where you're going, or how you are going to get to the end. This may be the time to focus on your story outline and synopsis to make sure you are heading forward with purpose.

Now on to the painful point...

### **Sharpen those editing tools!**

You've identified which scenes have purpose and which don't and where the problem originates from, so it's time to get editing, and you may need to get brutal! No one said this was going to be easy...

- Work on your saggy scenes to ensure there is purpose: that it links to the what has gone before and pushes forward to what is about to happen.
- Once you've made sure that your scene has purpose, check it for any unnecessary description, exposition, repetition — basically cut the waffle! We're trying to tone that middle, not hide all that great work under layers of padding.

- Adding purpose is not the same as an information dump! If you have a lot of information that needs to be shared by the mid-point, make sure those crumbs are dropping in sparingly before you get there.
- Sometimes a saggy scene can't be toned up. You need to be objective and honest. Even if you like the scene, if it isn't doing your story justice, it's time to let it go. This could be mean losing a whole scene — it's time for the chop!

And now breathe... How are you feeling after your workout? I hope you are feeling much more confident about how to tone up the middle of your story and have recognized that it deserves to be lavished with the same love and attention as the opening and ending.

Now, someone pass the cookies – I think I've earned one!

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*Joanne Grant is an editorial coach with over 16 years of editorial expertise working for the global bestselling publisher Harlequin. Joanne has edited hundreds of romance novels over the years and understands how to coach authors of all genres to deliver their best work. If you're interested in finding out how she can help you achieve your writing goals, get in touch – Joanne loves to chat! You can find Joanne on Twitter [@JoanneMGrant](#) and Facebook at [JoanneGrantEditorialCoach](#).*

# Working Through Writer's Block

Novelists, Inc. authors survey

*By Denise A. Agnew*



In June, I surveyed Novelists, Inc., authors about writer's block. Here is what I discovered to the two questions I asked:

*Question 1: What is your number one success strategy when you get writer's block?*

More than half the respondents either strategized/brainstormed or powered through.

## **Strategize/brainstorm with writer friends: 26 percent**

If you choose this route, just beware that if you ask more than one or two people to brainstorm with you, the writer's block can get worse if too many opinions overwhelm the muse. After you've brainstormed with friends, take time after to pinpoint what feels right. What thrills and excites you to move forward with the story?

## **Power through and keep writing: 26 percent**

Many writers were able to find their way out of a block by determination, which isn't always easy. But what if this doesn't work? What if powering through doesn't result in words on the page and forward momentum? After a couple of days, give yourself a day or two off to clear your mind or try a creative, non-writing project. If you don't have another creative outlet, reading or vegging in front of the TV with a favorite comfort program is an option. If you have a day job and write in the evening, know it's okay to take one or more of those evenings and do something else. More pressure to write can sometimes result in cementing the block rather than breaking it.

Others either outlined more or took a walk/drive.

**Outline more: 19 percent**

For those who fully plot a story before writing it, filling in plot holes can make all the difference and spark new ideas. Writer's block can mean not being deep enough into a character, so coming back around to the characters and asking more questions/interviewing them is an excellent idea.

**Take a drive or walk: 19 percent**

Mundane tasks can shift our brain and give it a chance to focus on something that isn't creating pressure. Once the pressure is off, ideas have a chance to pop in. Want to kick it up a notch? Consider making a drive to somewhere you've never been. Same with walking. Take a slightly different route and see what's out there. You're freeing your brain to not think or stress about the story.

Finally, a few took time off.

**Take a day off: 7 percent**

If you're physically or mentally tired, don't feel guilty taking a day off. If you try to power through exhaustion the results aren't likely to produce your best writing. So, if the words aren't flowing, an excellent idea can be to take a "mental health R&R" day.

**Take weeks off: 3 percent**

Many writers will hit a bump in their life, no matter the cause, which demands that they take a few weeks away from writing. Sometimes this is unavoidable. There are illnesses, deaths, divorces and any number of reasons why a writer could be thrown off their game. However, when weeks off become months with no creativity, this might be greater than having simple writer's block. Don't be afraid to ask for outside help, from either a writing coach or if there is a chance of deep-seated or clinical depression, with a psychologist or therapist.

While zero percent mentioned the next three things as ways they used to combat writer's block, I've talked about them in previous columns so I will recap them briefly as they are great strategies:

**Outline less/seat-of-the-pants writing**

If you're a die-hard outliner and get stuck, don't be afraid to loosen up. Taking a chance and allow the story to take it where it wants to go. Outlining is more akin to using the left brain to create a story, allowing for a feeling of safety and control. Seat-of-the-pants is more right-brained. Many (though certainly not all) writers are afraid if they don't outline/plot, the story will go all over the place. It could. It might not. Constraint, sometimes, is the opposite of creativity. Don't be afraid to try a little seat-of-the-pants and see if it can free up the log jam.



## **Meditate**

I found an article that details how meditation can help creativity blossom. In [Meditation For Creativity: Interview With Dr. Lorenza Colzato](#), Colzato discovered that meditation “improves divergent thinking, which is the kind of thought process that helps you brainstorm many ideas.” Further, she suspects that meditation “enhances creative thinking by improving people’s moods.” Click the link above and you can read the entire article which details the questions she was asked on her research into meditation and creativity.

## **Journal**

Most people probably wouldn’t think of journaling if they already have issues writing. In a journal, however, you aren’t required to outline or even make sense or say anything specific. There’s no pressure (or shouldn’t be) to write anything other than what you want. You can write anything that comes to mind: frustrations, worries, happiness, sadness, anger ... whatever your emotions happen to be, getting them down on paper is likely to help. One journaling technique I’ve learned is to write what you’d like to see happening in your life. You’re putting out to the world what you intend, your plans, what you love, etc. I recommend journaling even if you aren’t experiencing writer’s block. If you want, you can even write your questions in a notebook and answer them.

*Question 2: When you change genres or write in another genre rather than your primary one, what is the number one creative issue you have?*

The number one answer was suffer anxiety, followed by mental exhaustion. Together, these accounted for 75 percent of respondents.

### **Suffer anxiety: 50 percent**

As someone who has enjoyed many years of switching genres, this was eye-opening. If I had a client with this issue, I’d ask them to notice why they’re actually thinking about changing genres. I’ve noticed that writer’s block issues are often as much about what a writer believes to be true about the situation even if it’s not. So if a writer isn’t enjoying writing in another genre, they may not enjoy the change. They also aren’t asking themselves what it is about making a genre switch that is causing them distress.

### **Mental/physical exhaustion: 25 percent**

If you’re feeling this way when you switch genres, it’s a good time to ask if you’re giving yourself enough time off between books. Is the exhaustion because you’re trying to jump from finishing one book into another one without a break to relax and regroup? To me this is similar to the anxiety situation. Your health matters so give yourself some time to rest.

### **Creativity shutting down entirely: 19 percent**

If your creativity is taking a dive, my guess is that this one is close to the one above. If a writer isn't refreshed between books, there's a good possibility they won't have the energy to switch into a new genre.

### **Suffer depression: 6 percent**

This one relates closely to those who suffer anxiety. If I encountered a client with this issue, we'd have to take a deep dive into the reasons. Is it because they don't like writing in this other genre but they feel obligated to do so? Why do they feel they must write in this other genre? Should they consult outside medical professionals? Remember, your mental health should always come first.

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*Denise A. Agnew is the award-winning author of over 69 novels and screenplays. Denise's novels Love from The Ashes and Blackout were optioned for film/TV by Where's Lucy? Productions, Bright Frontier Films and MDR Entertainment. Denise is a Writer/Producer (Where's Lucy? Productions, Happy Catastrophe Productions, Bright Frontier Films), a paranormal investigator, Reiki Master, and Certified Creativity Coach. As a creativity coach, Denise assists anyone in the creative arts to maintain lifelong creativity. You can find her at [www.deniseagnew.com](http://www.deniseagnew.com) and [www.creativepencoaching.com](http://www.creativepencoaching.com).*

# The Mad Scribbler

## Self-Conduct

By Laura Resnick



*"Fans and creators alike have thanked Vault online for quickly taking a stand and making the decision not to work with someone with a history of misconduct."*

—The Beat (The News Blog of Comics Culture)

Many years ago, St. Martin's Press editor Jennifer Enderlin said something at a NINC conference that stuck with me. When determining whether to offer a writer another book contract, she based her decision on three criteria. If the answer was "yes" to at least two of these questions, she'd usually sign the author again:

1. Are this writer's sales figures good?
2. Does she (Enderlin) love this author's writing?
3. Does she like dealing with this writer?

I found the third criterion very comforting. I can't control my sales figures or whether someone likes my writing, but I can be fully responsible for my own behavior. I can control how I interact with people, what I am like to deal with, and whether I am professional and courteous in my working life.

I've been thinking about this a lot lately, especially since we live in an era where self-conduct increasingly affects one's career. Author [Myke Cole](#) is a recent example of this. He's a prolific sf/f novelist and nonfiction writer who has also appeared in documentary TV shows as an investigator. In January, *Hollywood Reporter* enthused, "Not content with writing about modern warfare and fantasy warfare in prose, author Myke Cole is coming to comics to take on historical warfare with his new series for Vault Comics, *Hundred Wolves*, described by the publisher as 'Saga meets *Braveheart*.'" (*Saga* is a long-running comic series that has won a raft of awards, including several Hugos.)

The series was set to launch at the end of this summer. Yet in late June, Vault Comics did an about-face, publicly announcing it was canceling *Hundred Wolves* and severing any connection to Cole. That same week, Cole's literary agent and another of his publishers also made similar announcements.

The publishing reaction against Cole began with a Twitter discussion in late June. This conversation shared personal stories about established male sf/f writers at conventions engaging in sexual misconduct toward new/unestablished women writers. Such accounts are a fairly frequent topic in the sf/f community, which has a long and dreary history of sexual misconduct. This recent Twitter discussion reminds us—surprise!—the problem hasn't miraculously disappeared in the year 2020. However, the ways of dealing with it are changing. Especially following the inspiring rise of the Me Too movement, women in sf/f are becoming much more publicly vocal, protesting and criticizing sexual misconduct, and asserting that sexual harassers should experience consequences.

So during this Twitter conversation about sexual misconduct at sf/f conventions, a comics artist and illustrator posted this Tweet [ECCC = Emerald City Comic Con]:



This post prompted a long, multi-branched Twitter thread that was very heated for several days, and which is still ongoing now. Numerous women came forward with allegations about Cole, as well as about several other writers.

In fact, Cole's behavior toward women had been the subject of a previous social media discussion two years earlier. At the time, he wrote an apology on his [blog](#):

I have to be accountable to you and to myself. I have repeatedly abused my social power. I have made unwelcome advances in professional settings and that is not okay.

This is humiliating to write, but it is also necessary, because I believe in the #MeToo movement and I 100% support women coming forward to name men who have made them uncomfortable, or worse abused them.

I read that blog post with interest in 2018 and followed some of the discussion at the time, primarily because I had met Myke Cole briefly a few times and liked him. But the episode soon rolled off my radar.

This new wave of discussion a couple of weeks ago, sparked by Cara McGee's Tweet, revealed there are a lot of ill feelings now toward Cole, along with various allegations of misconduct. Reading the threads, it wasn't clear to me whether the incidents being described occurred before or after his 2018 apology; I saw several people ask about this, but I didn't see any responses.

What was *very* clear, though, is that women in sf/f are **sick to death** of being treated as prey, as pieces of juicy meat, and as decorative objects assessed by *their professional peers* on the basis of their physical appearance and sex appeal. Women want to connect socially and network with their colleagues at sf/f conventions without being hit on, leered at, harassed, stalked, or groped... and also without being completely ignored and brushed off because certain male writers are *only* interested in "networking" with women they want to bed.

In other words: *We're your peers, just like the male writers you meet—so how about you treat us all the same way?*

While the number of people being named and criticized for sexual misconduct in sf/f (after McGee's Tweet) was expanding, Cole apologized in his own [series of tweets](#). He also re-tweeted the link to his 2018 apology. None of this was well received. Finally, he announced on June 25 he was withdrawing from "the public square," and he hasn't posted since.

All the while, some people's Tweets were proposing that his publishers and agent should drop him, even tweeting this directly at the agent in one or two instances.

Not long ago, that assertion would have been unrealistic. Cole has a healthy career, after all. And when have publishers and agents ever cared what writers think of each other?

But things are changing rapidly, and a person's self-conduct in our society increasingly affects their professional life. The same day that Cole got off Twitter, Vault Comics made its announcement about dropping him. A few hours later, so did another publisher:





His literary agent, Joshua Bilmes of JABberwocky Literary Agency, also dropped him that day, in a public [announcement](#) that concluded, "I will ensure that my actions and those of my agency (today and going forward) foster an environment that promotes safety and inclusion for all within the SF/F community, and the publishing industry at large."

That was when I learned that something virtually identical had happened in another instance just a week earlier.

On June 19, Dongwon Song of the Morhaim Literary Agency, publicly announced on Twitter he was dropping fantasy author Paul Krueger as a client after multiple women in sf/f accused Krueger of harassment. The agent added: "Thank you to those of you who spoke up. That took courage, and I am grateful to you all."

Whatever the motives or principles guiding the decisions these publishers and agents made, one thing is certain: They thought it was important to be *seen* dropping these writers. (Normally, publishers and agents drop writers quietly and privately.) Allegations about Cole's and Krueger's self-conduct created a situation where now the self-conduct of their industry partners was in the spotlight. The partners would be judged in public, and possibly experience consequences, based on how they reacted to the allegations about these writers. Now their own reputations were also at risk.

Speaking as someone who, in younger days, had an editor I made sure I was *never* alone with (he was eventually fired in a sexual harassment scandal)—an editor who was protected by that publisher for years—I am enthusiastically in favor of women writers demanding that all of this crap stop and that there must be consequences for sexual misconduct in our professional world.

That said, consequences are complex.

When someone behaves badly at conventions, it seems to me that an obvious consequence is for people to demand that conventions stop inviting them, featuring them, honoring them, offering them prestige and space to harass and violate others.

But Cole, Krueger, and the other sf/f writers whose names are now being circulated on Twitter with similar types of allegations are not being accused by anyone (so far as I have seen) of engaging in reprehensible behavior in their writing or publishing endeavors. No one is alleging they plagiarize, for example, or commit libel or violate their contracts.

I'm not sure I see a direct line between "this is a jerk who preys on women writers" so therefore, "he shouldn't be published or have literary representation." It's true that a convention is a work environment for sf/f writers, but it's a networking, self-promotion, and social environment—not a writing one. It makes sense to me that personal misconduct at a convention gets you "canceled" in the convention world. But should it also get you canceled in the realm of your writing? I find I feel ambivalent about this.

However, I was raised by a prominent sf/f writer, probably everyone who met me in sf/f knew I was his daughter, and I already had an established career as a romance writer (a genre in which I rarely even met a man) when I started writing sf/f. So I'm fortunate, because this meant I was never vulnerable or preyed upon by male writers who had more contacts, reputation, confidence, and power than I had—which is what these women experienced. I don't share the

perspective or experience of women who've been hurt or feel damaged by people like that. Yet I empathize with them and want them to be taken seriously.

I have questions, not answers. Impressions, not opinions. We're transitioning into an era of wider and deeper accountability. An era when more voices matter, and those voices are more varied. Past behaviors that once may have been tolerated are no longer accepted, nor should they be.

This brings me back to the one factor here that remains constant: I can control how I interact with people, what I am like to deal with, and whether I am professional and courteous in my working life. So can we all.

Good self-conduct has always been a moral imperative. Now, it turns out, it's also good business in our profession—and in many other professions.

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*Laura Resnick writes novels, short stories, and nonfiction.*

# Membership Benefits

**Need industry intel, software, or legal help? We've got you covered.**

Are you taking advantage of all your member benefits?

As a NINC member, your benefits include industry discounts, newsletter and website articles, professional services directory, networking opportunities, and more.

We've compiled all of these—which you can also find on our website—into this list as a helpful reminder.

## Networking

The email list for Novelists, Inc. Members: <https://groups.io/g/NINCLINK>

Join our Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/NovelistsInc/>

We offer a critique/brainstorming group: <https://groups.io/g/NINKcritique>

Follow NINC on Twitter: [https://twitter.com/Novelists\\_Inc](https://twitter.com/Novelists_Inc)

## Conference 2020:

Conference information: <https://ninc.com/conferences/about-the-ninc-conference/>

Conference Registration: <https://ninc.com/conferences/registration/>

Conference e-loop: <https://groups.io/g/BeachNINC2020/>

## Newsletter

Propose an article: <https://ninc.com/newsletter/propose-an-article/>

Submit a letter to the editor: <https://ninc.com/newsletter/submit-letter-to-editor/>

Newsletter archives: <https://ninc.com/newsletter/news-archive/>

## Website (you must be logged in to access these services)

Legal Fund: <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/legal-fund/>

Pro Services Directory: <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/pro-services-directory/>

Sample Letters: <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/sample-letters/>

Articles & Links: <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/articles-and-links/>

Welcome Packet: [http://ninc.com/system/assets/uploads/](http://ninc.com/system/assets/uploads/2017/01/2017_New_Member_Welcome_Packet-public.pdf)

[2017/01/2017\\_New\\_Member\\_Welcome\\_Packet-public.pdf](http://ninc.com/system/assets/uploads/2017/01/2017_New_Member_Welcome_Packet-public.pdf)

## Member discounts

NINC members are eligible for certain professional discounts. A complete listing of these can be found at <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/member-freebies-discounts/> along with other member discounts.

## **Volunteer**

One of the greatest benefits of NINC is the opportunity to volunteer your talents to benefit other members—which pays incredible and unexpected dividends in networking and knowledge. Learn more about volunteer opportunities here: <https://ninc.com/members-only/open-positions/>

Open positions include:

- Social Media Committee
- Tweet Team
- Recruiting New Members
- Anything!



*Founded in 1989*

### **NINC Statement of Principle**

Novelists, Inc., in acknowledgment of the crucial creative contributions novelists make to society, asserts the right of novelists to be treated with dignity and in good faith; to be recognized as the sole owners of their literary creations; to be fairly compensated for their creations when other entities are profiting from those creations; and to be accorded the respect and support of the society they serve.

### **Founders**

- Rebecca Brandewyne
- Janice Young Brooks
- Jasmine Cresswell
- Maggie Osborne
- Marianne Shock

### **2020 Board of Directors**

*If you have questions regarding Novelists, Inc., please contact a member of the Board of Directors.*

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## 2020 Committees

*[Complete committee member listings](#) are available on the website. Many committee positions are open and looking for new volunteers.*

- 2020 Conference Committee:
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Novelists, Inc. c/o Terese Ramin

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*Address changes may be made on the website.*

### **Nink Newsletter**

*July 2020 edition – Vol. 31, No. 7*

*Nink's* goal is to provide our readers with high-quality articles that offer critical business advice, marketing how-tos, advanced craft coaching, or strategy to continue building a career, all geared to established authors. All members should feel confident that *Nink* provides something for them. We welcome pitches and submissions from all members.

To request reprint rights or to **submit an article proposal**, please contact [the editor](#).

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