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a professional organization
of writers of popular fiction



novelists,
inc.

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President's Voice

By Tawdra Kandle



There were times this year when I didn't think this day would really come, but here we are in conference month! In just a few weeks, what may be the oddest and most unusual NINC conference will take place in St. Pete Beach.

It will also be the smallest conference in ... a long time. I know some of you are curious about the numbers, and we've been reluctant to discuss that because the count has changed daily since early July. But yes, we are going to be below one hundred attendees. We will be an intimate crowd of socially distant authors.

Before I go on, I want to address one point. Since March, we've had one question recurred over and over, no matter how often we've answered it: why can't we offer a virtual aspect to the NINC conference this year?

The answer is multi-faceted. The board discussed this back in April, and we determined that if the conference went on in any kind of live, in-person format, we would not be able to offer a virtual component. Our first issue is registration. Most of what our members pay for a conference goes toward the food costs. A virtual event, without any way to provide that food, would have to be priced for the value of the workshops alone, so we knew we couldn't simply substitute a virtual conference ticket for an in-person one. That meant creating an entirely new registration process, which would have been a nightmare for our central coordinator, registrar and treasurer.

The second issue is the cost of the software to be able to broadcast the workshops to as many attendees as might register and the dearth of on-site volunteers to actually make it happen.

The third and most compelling reason is that almost all of our presenters agree to speak on the condition that they are only presenting to live attendees. Even our virtual speakers have that requirement. The live, non-recorded nature of our conference has long been a hallmark of NINC and is the reason speakers feel comfortable sharing more than usual. They certainly would not consent to having any portion of their workshops recorded, and so the time difference would make it difficult for our overseas members to take part in the conference.

We understand the disappointment of our members who wish they could be with us in some way. We are going to miss every one of you who can't be with us, and we'll be so happy when we're all back together next year.

Speaking of our virtual presenters, our president-elect and assistant programming chair, Lisa Hughey, has been working hard to make these workshops possible. Unfortunately, Lisa won't be able to join us in-person but will be facilitating the virtual workshops from home. If you're attending in-person, you may see her name pop up on the screen during the virtual sessions. Please know she's just making sure things run smoothly. We're grateful Lisa is still willing to do this job even though she won't get to enjoy a week at the beach!

Speaking of being grateful ... we are so thankful for our sponsors this year. Vellum, Draft2Digital, Kobo, BookBub, Amazon and LaLa Projects all paid sponsorship money toward our conference even though they can't be present. All will present virtually, and if you are going to be in St. Pete Beach, I encourage you to attend their workshops. They will all present live, so you'll be able to ask questions and hear answers!

If you're not able to be with us, remember that reports on every workshop will appear in the October and November issues of the newsletter. Watch for them!

How many times have I said that 2020 is challenging? Too many! However, although none of us would have asked for what this year has brought us, I know I've learned a few things. I've realized that no matter how carefully I plan, my expectations and preconceived notions about life and my career won't always be met. (Who went to Sarra Cannon's sessions last year and strutted into 2020 with a detailed plan? Who was able to stick to that plan in this crazy time?) I've learned that if I don't relax and roll with the proverbial waves, I'm going to get sucked under and drown. I've remembered that if I have the right group of people around me, I can get through any storm.

Our conference this year won't be the sell-out we'd expected back in February. We're all going to look around the rooms and miss our usual conference pals. We're going to be sad that we can't network and catch up with those friends we only see at NINC every fall. And those friends are going to be missing us, too. But we're not going to let this wave drag us under. Along with the rest of NINC's leadership, I'm already looking ahead to 2021 and anticipating being in full workshops next year. We can't wait to give you a conference you'll never forget—one that will be all the sweeter because of what we've all gone through this year.

To those of you attending this year—I'll see you at the beach in a few weeks. To those of you who can't be with us, know that you will be in our hearts and on our minds, and we'll hope that we can all be together in 2021.

~ Tawdra Kandle

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

From Fiction to Nonfiction Author, Part 1

Exploring how to make the shift

By Trish Milburn



One of the most attractive aspects of being a novelist is that, for the most part, we get to make stuff up. If we can imagine a character, a plot or a setting, we can breathe it into existence through our writing. Certainly, we conduct research to make real aspects of our worlds authentic, but we're not writing nonfiction with its required strict adherence to facts. But the skills we use during fiction writing will transfer when turning our writing efforts to nonfiction projects. And those nonfiction works can serve multiple purposes: additional income, establishing credibility as an expert and, sometimes, cross-promotional opportunities if that nonfiction is related to your fiction work.

Even if you don't have any background in nonfiction works—as a journalist, technical writer or nonfiction book author—tackling a nonfiction project is something to consider if you believe you have worthwhile information to share. The topic of the nonfiction doesn't have to be related to writing. NINC members have written memoirs, cookbooks, history references, biographies, travelogues, books related to other types of careers and more.

Should you write nonfiction?

If you've always been mainly a fiction writer with perhaps only the occasional article under your belt, one of the first questions to ask is whether some topic is calling to you or if there's one about which you are an expert—or both.

[Rachel Aukes](#) combined something she wanted to see in the field of writing guides with an organizational approach of which she was a fan.

"My *Tidy Guides* series are books for planning, writing, publishing and marketing novels," Aukes said. "When I began writing my first novel, I devoured books on writing, such as *The Romance Writer's Handbook* by Rebecca Vinyard and *APE: Author, Publisher, Entrepreneur* by Guy Kawasaki and Shawn Welch. There are many great books out there, but I noticed that everything out there gave lengthy, in-depth coverage of their topics. Being a fan of Marie

Kondo's *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, I wanted to see books that provided the necessary information in an uncluttered, succinct manner, and the *Tidy Guides* were born."

[Ruth Glick](#)'s first nonfiction book came about as a financial decision, but not the type you might assume.

"My first nonfiction was called *Dollhouse Furniture You Can Make*," Glick said. "I started it because my daughter wanted a doll house, and I saw how expensive the furniture would be. Then I thought—I'm pretty good at making tiny furniture and accessories; maybe I can turn this project into a book. I worked on it with a friend, Nancy Baggett, and we sold it to A.S. Barnes, a craft publisher."

Glick actually started her writing career in nonfiction, gaining recognition as a cookbook author.

"When the National Academy of Sciences came out with their study, 'Diet, Nutrition, and Cancer' in 1982, they recommended that people eat no more than 30 percent of their calories from fat."

Knowing people would not know how to do this and get good-tasting food, Glick co-wrote with friends and their agent sold it.

"That made me an early expert in low-fat cooking," Glick said, "and I did several books in that field, some for the American Diabetes Association."

A natural pivot is for fiction authors to write nonfiction about the writing process. Critique partners [Jeannie Lin](#) and [Bria Quinlan](#) co-authored *Finding Your Writer's Voice*. Nikoo and Jim McGoldrick, who write together as [May McGoldrick](#), wrote about how they write as a team in *Marriage of Minds: Collaborative Fiction Writing*. They also used their experience as creative writing teachers to write *Step Write Up: 21st Century Creativity Skills*, which includes hands-on exercises for teachers and workshop leaders.

[Nancy J. Cohen](#) wrote a how-to that filled a gap in the world of writing guides, *Writing the Cozy Mystery*.

"Being a cozy author didn't get much respect, and I felt writing an instructional book on this topic would bring recognition to the genre," Cohen said. "When I got a lot of questions afterward from cozy authors, I decided a second edition was necessary. *Writing the Cozy Mystery: Expanded Second Edition* tripled the content from the first book. These are not long works. I wrote them assuming writers interested in pursuing this genre would already have a grasp of basic writing skills."

Also of potential interest is turning a business or tools of the trade aspect into nonfiction. Such was the case for [Gwen Hernandez](#), who translated her early expertise with Scrivener into a spot in the "For Dummies" brand.

"I started writing on this topic in 2009 when I was a new writer looking for blog content (because everyone said you had to have a blog)," Hernandez said. "I love software and technology, and I had started to dig into Scrivener's features. When a friend asked me how I did something, I figured others might be interested in the answer. With my background experience in both tech and teaching, it was a natural fit to create a series of weekly blog posts on Scrivener, which turned into online courses and in-person workshops, which led to the book deal for *Scrivener For Dummies*."

One of [Matt Buchman](#)'s nonfiction books married the writer's life with "real" life when he produced *Estate Planning for Authors*. Another targeted a specific area of interest for indie authors—*Narrating and Recording Your Own Audiobook*.

The perfect situation is perhaps when an author's fiction and nonfiction work are directly related, leading to cross-promotional and additional discoverability opportunities. Such was the case for Cohen, author of the *Bad Hair Day* mystery series.

"Often in my stories, I've described food or I'll have my hairstylist sleuth cooking a meal while discussing a murder case with her detective husband," Cohen said. "I enjoy cooking classes, reading food magazines and experimenting in the kitchen. I even have a special section on my website for recipes. Then I thought, why don't I compile these recipes into a cookbook? I could eliminate most of them from my website to save storage space. And fans could get all the recipes in one place."

To make it special, Cohen wrote from the viewpoint of her sleuth.

"*A Bad Hair Day Cookbook* has over 160 recipes along with cooking tips, anecdotes, excerpts and themed holiday menus," Cohen said. "I think of it as a companion to my mystery series, but it's also a standalone cookbook for anyone who likes to cook but not spend hours in the kitchen."

[Nicole Evelina](#) has the same type of beneficial connection between her *Guinevere's Tale* trilogy and her nonfiction *The Once and Future Queen: Guinevere in Arthurian Legend*. But this nonfiction work also has the distinction of adding to Arthurian scholarship.

"I wrote it because, when I was researching my historical fantasy series on Guinevere, it was really hard to find information on her character; I really had to dig in some obscure academic sources," Evelina said. "I wanted all that research not to go to waste, and I wanted to save future researchers from having to go on the same quest I had to. "I don't sell a huge number of that book, but I've seen it referenced in the work of other scholars/academics so that is very rewarding."

Similarities and differences between fiction and nonfiction

Since Evelina writes historical fiction, she already does a lot of research. However, she said there are still substantial differences between that and writing nonfiction on historical subjects.

"The main difference is you have to be much more meticulous when you write nonfiction," she said. "You need to keep very close track of every one of your sources (and page numbers) and make sure you type quotes exactly. I know that sounds silly, but other researchers will be using your work to aid in theirs so you really have to get everything right."

"When you research for historical fiction, you can write down the gist of an idea or paraphrase a quote and not worry about accidentally committing plagiarism because you're going to weave what you learn into a whole new type of narrative. Similarly, you don't have to be as exacting in your documentation unless you plan to blog about it later."

For Lin, who writes historical romance fiction along with her nonfiction project authored with Quinlan, the main similarity was Lin's overall approach to the writing process. However, everything else feels like night and day.

"I tend to draft with abandon and then drill down to detail in the revision process, and that was the same for both fiction and nonfiction," Lin said. "But given that I was working on the nonfiction project with a co-author, everything felt different. Also due to experience, I wasn't nearly as comfortable with writing nonfiction. We did a lot of research into what other craft books were doing, deliberated on little nit-picky things like how to present and format. We also spent a lot of time developing exercises."

For Lin, the nonfiction process felt like writing without a roadmap for a lot of it.

"I think that would be true even if we had a few more books under our belts," Lin said. "Fiction, especially genre fiction, follows many expected tropes and frameworks. With nonfiction, though there are some conventions, I think the puzzle you have to solve is the best way to present your information. And there is a lot more variation in how to do that."

For [Maddie James](#), who has written nonfiction in the education and nonprofit fields, she stays a linear writer no matter what.

"I tend to want to write in order of a sequence of events," James said. "However, I've found with nonfiction that can sometimes work, and sometimes not. If I'm conducting interviews, those do not always fall into any sort of linear sequence. If a new source appears, or I land upon a must-use piece of research, then I'm digging back into a section that was already previously thought done. Now, that can happen in fiction too, but not as likely for me."

The value of a fiction background for writing nonfiction

Though the adherence to truth factor differentiates fiction and nonfiction, there is definite value to having experience as a novelist before dipping one's toes into writing nonfiction.

"I think authors transitioning from fiction to nonfiction have an advantage over those who do it the other way around because we're already experienced in how to tell an entertaining story, and that is what separates successful nonfiction from dry textbooks," Evelina said.

Lin added that there are skills you learn about clarity, as well as the mechanics of writing and communicating that translate from one side to the other. She also included the ability to take critique and feedback and understand, in your bones, the process of putting something out to the world that will be critiqued and reacted to.

"I think that transcends fiction or nonfiction, and it's an important understanding to have if you're going to write words for money," Lin said.

[Sara Fitzgerald](#), author of the biography, *Elly Peterson, Mother of the Moderates*, credited her previous fiction writing for teaching her a lot about pacing, character development and telling detail.

"The best of nonfiction is narrative nonfiction, and the best-selling authors are great storytellers," Fitzgerald said.

The value of a nonfiction background for writing fiction

Whether an author has started out in nonfiction or simply writes a pivotal nonfiction piece that influences later fiction, there are also benefits from progressing in the opposite direction.

[Linda Barrett](#) credits a memoir she wrote about her two bouts with breast cancer as inspiration for some of her subsequent fiction.

“The first book of my Pilgrim Cove series featured a heroine with breast cancer,” she said. “Of course, she has a happily ever after. That book was written after my first cancer experience. At the time, I didn’t know I’d be facing it again.”

[Jenny Gardiner](#), who has written creative nonfiction and a memoir centered around having a vengeful parrot as a pet, said she found turning to writing fiction after a lifetime of having to adhere to facts very liberating.

“Imagine—you can write whatever you want and don’t have to worry about it being true! That made me very happy,” she said.

Like many novelists, Chere Coen, who writes the Viola Valentine mystery series under the name [Cherie Claire](#), has a background in journalism and continues to work in the field. That work has influenced both her fiction and nonfiction books.

“I write about travel, history and cultural issues in my journalism job, so my books reflect those subjects, particularly in Louisiana and the Deep South,” Coen said. “Plus, I love ghost stories and my Viola Valentine fictional mystery series involves ghosts while one of my books for The History Press is *Haunted Lafayette, Louisiana*. One of my nonfiction books focuses on gris-gris bags, or mojo bags, which has a link to my hometown of New Orleans. My cookbook, *Cookin’ in Cajun Country*, has recipes from a Cajun chef and I wrote the travelogue that went along with his recipes.”

In the second half of this exploration of branching into nonfiction in next month’s issue of *Nink*, we’ll cover the mechanics of switching between fiction and nonfiction, deciding if it’s a good financial decision to tackle a nonfiction project, how to shift gears to writing nonfiction, and advice from authors who’ve already taken that path.

[Trish Milburn](#) is the author of more than 50 novels and novellas, including her current *Idol in Love* series set in the world of K-pop.

Help, My Pay-Per-Click Ads Aren't Delivering!

(a.k.a. You might be in AI hell)

By Michele Dunaway



You've done it all. You've produced the perfect book. You've created sharp and clear pay-per-click ads. You've read all the articles on SEO to drive traffic to your website, how to reach your hot audience with your ads, etc.

Then crickets. Your ads did not do as well as you hoped. Not only did they fail to attract readers, but you got a whole lot of clicks and not a lot of purchases, destroying your budget.

So what happened? Most likely you've been a victim of AI.

How AI can interfere with your ads

Facebook, Google, Amazon and similar online companies all use artificial intelligence to send advertising your way. That's why if you search for a new washing machine, suddenly your feed is flooded with washing machine advertising, even after you purchase one. While you can customize the ads you want to see on places like Facebook and Twitter (it's found under your profile settings), it might not be a good idea to give them specific directions on how to best target you, which is what you do if you say you want to see, for instance, automotive ads.

I've avoided turning on the customize-your-ad feed feature. Instead, I click on the ads that interest me for products I have no intention of buying but I can live with seeing on a daily basis. So my Facebook feed is currently flowing with advertisements for high-end real estate. And I keep clicking because dream houses are pretty to look at, and this way I don't see anything else. But I'm not going to buy a new million dollar house any more than I'm going to buy the how-to books that used to flood my feed.

I'm confirmation of what Arijit Sengupta wrote about in his [article](#), that often AI algorithms are trained to find the wrong things.

To illustrate, Sengupta wrote that his company purchased a number of Google ads and used the feature where Google's AI figures out the best search words. What he discovered was that Google's AI had picked up on the word "models" from his company's ad. However instead of reaching those who were trying to find the company's AI predictive models, the ads reached

people doing adult-themed searches for models “of a very different kind.” So they clicked through to his company’s website and left immediately.

What happens next with Google, and Amazon, and other similar companies running your ads, is that these companies then lower your ad optimization scores. As in Sengupta’s case, Google “served up our ads less frequently and charged us more money to get the same results.”

This came as a surprise to Sengupta, who tells readers he’s been in AI for over two decades. “Google’s AI wasn’t wrong per se, it was just trained to optimize the wrong thing—the volume of clicks rather than the relevancy of those clicks,” he said.

Your ads—the ones you are using with the best keywords you can find—are designed for the volume of clicks. Yet those ads can still reach the wrong people, wasting a click and your money. This AI optimization is also why when you purchase one pair of shoes, you’re going to have ads following you for days trying to sell you shoes. Or as in the example in Sengupta’s article, toilet seat covers. Or in my case, I bought four bar stools from Target, but I’d favorited two brands before I chose the one I purchased. Target is still trying to sell me the other bar stools, not recognizing I already bought four—from Target.

Sengupta brings up other examples of how your ads can land in the wrong spot because of AI. He referenced Ruth Reader’s [article](#), in which Reader reports that, in May and June, “advertisements for primary care center One Medical appeared on a conspiracy theory website called Waking Times next to the following headline ‘The Coronavirus Vaccine As Source of Dangerous Invasion.’” One Medical had to blacklist the site in order to stop the AI from featuring the company’s ads. Reader also reported that “Google placed advertisements for AAA, AARP, Coronavirus.gov, Geico, Lending Tree, Subaru, UNICEF, and The United States Forest Service next to health misinformation.”

Keywords gone awry

So back to your ads and why this is relevant. If your ads are not performing, or if they are getting clicks but not action, your keywords might be landing your ads in places you don’t want them to be and where they won’t ever sell. Unless you are digging deep and doing the follow through as to where and on what pages your ads are landing, you might not even know those ads haven’t made it in front of your target audience. Worse, your ads could be landing in places that where you certainly don’t want to be and might even damage your brand.

Sengupta writes, “Several years ago Coca-Cola, Walmart, Starbucks, and several other major brands pulled their ads from YouTube after they learned that the site had been running their ads next to deeply offensive content. Google (which owns YouTube) had trained the AI to be smart enough to pair ads with videos that get a lot of fresh clicks, but too dumb to avoid content that was racist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic. Google’s AI was designed to increase sales, but it wound up damaging brands.”

The keywords you use may seem innocent enough, however, Sengupta said that Google’s Keywords Planner offers hundreds of suggestions related to “Black Girls,” “Latina girls,” and “Asian girls,” the majority of which are pornographic, according to *The Markup*. [The Markup article](#) maintains that until it brought this fact to Google’s attention, “Google’s systems contained a racial bias that equated people of color with objectified sexualization.”

What authors can do

While Sengupta's article focuses on calling on tech companies to change AI and add more human oversight, one takeaway is that authors must do more than find the best terms for ads on Facebook, Google, Amazon, etc.

Almost every AMS class talks about how to use Amazon's match types, and Visiture's Ron Dod's tip #2 is to use match types, saying "[Amazon advertising uses broad, phrase, exact, and negative match types to refine targeting.](#)" (P.S., Dod does have some good tips to check out if you click through the previous hyperlink on negative matching.)

As authors we focus on creating the best possible ads and getting our books higher in searches, but we often don't think through the potential misplacement of our advertising, instead trusting that Amazon or Facebook will get it right.

We also might not follow up on finding out exactly where our "sponsored" ads land.

Which means that, because of AI, even something as innocent-sounding as Asian firefighter romance might land you somewhere you don't want to be. Or if your book is about heroes fighting Nazis in the 1940s, you might not want your advertising to land on current day alt-right or QAnon pages, which it potentially could if the AI picks up on the term Nazis.

And remember Sengupta's models? There are also model trains, model airplanes, etc. So if Google places his AI modeling ad on a page for model railroad buffs, they might click, but they won't stay, wasting the advertising budget.

This is why "negative" words do matter in creating your ad, (and if you're not sure what that means, Google explains it [here](#).) negative words also must be chosen with care. In fact, buried way at the bottom of instructions, Google says, "If you use too many negative keywords, your ads might reach fewer customers" and "Negative keywords do not match to [close variants](#) so your ad might still show on searches or pages that contain close variations of your negative keyword terms." Again, because a computer is picking placement of your ads and not an actual human being, flawed algorithms can hurt your performance and your ad placement.

So search all keywords (including negative) thoroughly to see where Google, Amazon, and Facebook hit first. Try to assess what people AI is going to put your ads in front of. Do this in order to try and determine who you might reach and how to best to reach them, and also do this to determine who might get your ads by mistake, and to find out what potential sites or people you certainly don't want to reach or be associated with. It's much more work. But it could save you money in the long run.

Michele Dunaway loves the St. Louis Blues. You're assuming she means the 2019 Stanley Cup champions. Or is it the song? (Spoiler. Both. It's why the Blues have a musical note on their jerseys). She's currently working on the second book of a hockey trilogy.

Social Media Promotion, Part Two

Best practices for 2020

By Mindy Klasky



Author Note: Social media remain a linchpin for many authors' promotional efforts. This article outlines current best practices for five relatively under-utilized social media networks: LinkedIn, Snapchat, TikTok, WeChat, and WhatsApp. (It also includes a brief update about Tumblr.) Last month, we looked at some of the more established players in the field: Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, and YouTube. Please note, paid advertising on social media platforms is beyond the scope of this article.

Editor's Note: As of Aug. 6, President Donald Trump issued an executive order which will ban any US companies or citizens from making transactions with ByteDance, the parent company of the video-sharing social networking service TikTok, in 45 days. Trump also issued an order taking similar action against Tencent, the Chinese company that owns WeChat. On Aug. 5, Instagram debuted Reels, its version of TikTok.

New social media networks seem to pop up every day, and as they do, authors might want to target these apps, even if there is no guarantee they will be around, for these networks attract users who are international and young. Each platform's unique rules and configurations encourage users to develop new modes of engaging users. As with legacy social media, savvy promoters choose platforms that play to their strengths, keeping abreast of changes at those sites.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn was created specifically to connect business partners (sometimes referred to as building "B2B leads"). According to LinkedIn, the network includes over 660 million users in more than 200 countries. While some authors use LinkedIn as yet another platform to correspond with readers, the network's strength is in bringing together publishing professionals—authors, book designers, editors, publishers, etc.—to discuss matters specifically related to the

publishing business. The following best practices, therefore, focus on that business mission, rather than on socializing with readers.

1. **Optimize your profile.** LinkedIn's algorithms favor profiles that list at least five relevant skills, include a professional profile picture with an appropriate background photo, and are complete with up-to-date information. LinkedIn recently added a "Services" feature helping members highlight their range of services; authors should complete that profile section. Users can endorse the skills of business colleagues, which frequently leads to reciprocal endorsements. They can also request recommendations (personal testimonials).
2. **Be engaged.** LinkedIn's algorithms reward engagement. Therefore, users should be active. Follow industry influencers, comment, message, add connections, and otherwise interact with other members on the site.
3. **Create long-form content.** The most successful content on LinkedIn solves members' problems by providing specific answers to users' questions. How-to information and lists result in the most popular posts. Individual entries can run up to 1300 characters; titles of 40-49 characters perform best.
4. **Build real relationships.** LinkedIn users tend to be savvy business people who don't respond well to spam, hard-sell messages, or general posts. But users who focus on building true business relationships through the system see responses. For example, LinkedIn claims that its in-system messages ("InMail") are 300 times more likely to receive a reply than a standard email.
5. **Observe traditional business hours.** Because LinkedIn is primarily a business tool, its users are most active during traditional business hours midweek—from 8 a.m. Tuesday to 4 p.m. Thursday. Users tend to be less responsive on Mondays (when they're catching up from a weekend off) or on Fridays (when they're preparing to leave the office for the weekend.)

Snapchat

Snapchat is a social media network with more than 218 million daily users, the majority of whom are under 35. The mobile-phone app allows members to post "snaps," photos and short videos that can be modified with filters, stickers, and text. Each snap has a timer, limiting how many seconds that snap can be viewed. "Stories" made of multiple snaps persist for 24 hours. (Snaps can also be saved as screenshots.) In 2019, rumors flourished that Snapchat was losing business; however, its parent company set a new record for quarterly revenue in the first quarter of 2020. Therefore, Snapchat seems likely to stick around, at least for a while.

1. **Be original.** Snapchat users enjoy access to exclusive material that isn't available on any other platform. Originality is more important than perfect photo composition, lighting, or other formatting.
2. **Show "behind the scenes" activities.** Snapchat users love the impression of participating in everyday moments of one another's lives. This makes the platform

especially useful for teasing not-yet-released books, including preorders. Authors can also share live events, writing conferences, or one-off celebrations, such as selling the 10,000th copy of a book.

3. **Be succinct.** Snapchat users are looking for fun, quick interactions. Users tend to be distracted easily; therefore, stories should be no longer than two minutes. Strip all unnecessary information from your posts.
4. **Post frequently.** Since snaps disappear in 24 hours or less, frequent posting is vital to preserve your Snapchat presence. At a minimum, you should post 1-5 times each day.
5. **Partner with influencers.** Like other social media network, Snapchat has established influencers who court numerous followers. Connect with influencers in your genre to spread information about your books.

TikTok

TikTok is a social media network offering short (15 seconds, by default) video content. It boasts 800 million active users, 41% of whom are 16-24 years old. The average user spends almost an hour a day on the mobile phone app. As of Aug. 5, Chinese tech company ByteDance owns TikTok. Because of alleged national security concerns, some companies and the military have banned employees from putting the app on their phones.

1. **Complete your profile.** At the moment, only select users are allowed to add a website link to their bio; however, all users can add Instagram and YouTube profiles to their TikTok profiles. (TikTok and Instagram seem to have a substantial affinity for identical or similar content; however, the feed post dimensions differ. Instagram feed posts are 4:5; TikTok videos are 16:9.)
2. **Follow the trends.** Music and dance are hugely popular, with many videos earning “copycat” viral spread. Other popular trends include lip syncs, fitness workouts, pranks, and a wide range of challenges.
3. **Make videos fun.** Keep your posts humorous, and don’t attempt to engage in serious communication. TikTok’s short videos are intended to be “snacks,” not rigorous nutrition.
4. **Create unique content.** TikTok users expect unique content, created and distributed within the app. Repurposed content is typically ignored; some users will call out repurposing and urge others to mock it.
5. **Unclear algorithms.** TikTok is so new that no industry leaders have fully parsed its algorithms. Nevertheless, it seems as if those algorithms begin by spreading videos based on similar geo-locations. Using trending hashtags and sounds seems to boost discoverability as well. Videos (even older ones) can go viral in a flash, often because a hashtag or a sound spikes in popularity.

Tumblr

Tumblr is included on this list of social media platforms, but its network has largely fallen into disuse. Extensive research on best practices revealed no articles more recent than 2018, with

most of the articles substantially predating that. Current user data was virtually non-existent from any credible source. Therefore, authors are likely better served to focus on other platforms.

WeChat

WeChat is a social media network based in China. Its “Moments” platform allows users to post images, text, and short videos. Moments can be linked to Facebook and Twitter accounts. WeChat’s more than one billion monthly users are regularly tracked by Chinese authorities. The service censors topics it believes Chinese authorities will consider politically sensitive. At present, very little content at WeChat goes viral.

1. **Target Chinese citizens living overseas.** Many Chinese citizens live abroad as students or as residents. They’re prime contacts for this evolving social media network.
2. **KOL v. KOC.** WeChat doesn’t have “influencers” like those found on US-based sites. Rather, there are Key Opinion Leaders (KOL) and Key Opinion Consumers (KOC). KOLs build up large numbers of followers, and they accept money to promote goods or services. They don’t, however, yet have the social legitimacy to make posts go viral. Instead, KOCs are perceived by many users to be less cynical and less likely to have their opinions purchased by outsiders. Even though KOCs have smaller groups of followers than KOLs, they might actually have greater influence. Focus on finding KOCs who communicate with people likely to read your books.
3. **Follow the format.** WeChat posts resemble blog posts. When crafting posts, maintain user interest by getting to your main point quickly. Finish strongly, in hopes of getting users to click the “Wow” button.
4. **Hone content.** WeChat posts aren’t likely to be seen by a large community of users. Therefore, it’s very important to have a specific goal for each post—provide book launch information, inform readers about sales, etc.
5. **Harness in-app search.** WeChat has an internal search feature designed to help users find specific content amid the huge number of posts made on the platform. Standard SEO practices (e.g., including strong keywords in titles and headings) is important to make the best use of this feature.

WhatsApp

WhatsApp is a social media network with two billion users located primarily in India, Brazil, and other non-US countries. (WhatsApp was acquired by Facebook in 2014, but it has been maintained as a separate platform.) While it began as a messaging service, allowing users to send text messages to other users’ telephone numbers, it now permits users to share media. Its simplicity, encryption of files, and refusal to share information with third parties have proven attractive to younger users. Users have a median age of 36, and 71% of all users are in the age bracket 18-44.

1. **Get permission.** WhatsApp terms of service prohibit you from searching for or buying contacts. Instead, you must ask users to share their phone numbers with you or to

message you first. This restriction results in an audience that is highly motivated to hear what you have to say.

2. **Engage with your contacts.** WhatsApp messages enjoy extremely high engagement rates. According to HootSuite, 98% of WhatsApp mobile messages are opened and read, and 90% of those messages receive a response within three seconds of receipt. Harness this engagement by actively communicating with your WhatsApp contacts.
3. **Keep it short.** One marketing firm found that its WhatsApp messages enjoyed the most engagement when they were 15 words or shorter.
4. **Do not share newsletters.** Mass-mailing users is strictly forbidden by WhatsApp's terms of service. The app reserves the right to sue any user who distributes newsletters or similar communications through the service.
5. **Consider doing consumer research.** WhatsApp Business (a separate, pay-to-play service that runs on the WhatsApp platform) provides many tools for consumer research. Business users can ask direct questions, send surveys and polls, and respond to individual queries, such as customer-service complaints.

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.

The Devil is in the Details!

The details that can undermine your carefully constructed characters

By Joanne Grant



Excellent characterization is the backbone to every good story. So much goes into creating believable, three-dimensional strong characters—solid back stories, clear motivations, compelling conflicts and vivid physical descriptions—but small details can be the undoing of all that good work. A misplaced “out of character” moment or action can take the reader out the story, undermine the consistency of the character, and shake the foundations of believability.

To ensure that your characters are as real and unique to the reader as they are to you, in this article I’ll highlight three key areas of mindfulness when writing and self-editing your work.

Out-of-character behavior

This seems like an obvious one, but I’m not talking about the fun out-of-character behaviors that demonstrate there’s been a key shift in character development. As long as the behavior is well-motivated, the reader will love these moments as they are often the key turning points for the story—you’ve been building to them, the reader understands them and revels in the character’s unusual behavior.

Instead, it’s the small, inconsistent details that can stand out to the reader and slowly chip away at their confidence in the character, and in turn the story. Here are some examples:

- She is an edgy, top-of-her-game businesswoman—but she leaves a meeting because she is about to cry.
- He only drinks black coffee for breakfast—but complains later he is hungry because he skipped breakfast.
- She’s never even been kissed—but is suddenly a sex kitten in the bedroom displaying a surprisingly encyclopedic knowledge of the *Kama Sutra*!

In each of these examples, the intention of this behavior may be to further the plot. If this is the case—as always—motivation is key! But if you can't realistically motivate them to behave in this way, or there was no specific intent behind the behavior—the inconsistency should be eliminated.

Let's take each example in turn:

- You want to demonstrate that your steely businesswoman is so emotionally affected by this meeting she cries, so show *why* she has been moved to this extreme! But if her tears are not integral to the plot—the intention is just to show that the meeting has got to her—think about how she would react that is more in keeping with her character.
- For our coffee-drinking hero—this could just be a slip of continuity—if he *never* has breakfast, he can never miss it, so clear up this inconsistency. Believe me, readers do notice these things!
- As for our sex kitten—on reflection you may realize you've written a sexually confident heroine because this is what comes naturally to you. Either give a realistic reason how she can be so knowledgeable (maybe she has studied the *Kama Sutra*?!), or, re-write the scene with your inexperienced heroine in mind. But if her being a virgin isn't integral to the plot, you may want to question whether the virgin heroine trope is right for you at all.

Out-of-character language

It takes time to develop and find your own author voice; however, once you do, it becomes your anchor for your readers who will want return to you time and time again. But when it comes to creating character voice—how can you make sure that their voice and the language they use is distinct from your voice and that of other characters? After all, this character came from you and whether you intend it or not and they may just accidentally share some of your verbal quirks.

Here are some examples where character language can trip you up:

- **Colloquial phrases:** They hold meaning to you—based on your background and experiences—but probably have no place in your characters' vocabularies based on their background.
- **Age-appropriate phrases:** Using dated/old-fashioned phrases or too contemporary phrases for your character's age can really jar and make readers question the authenticity of the character.
- **Culturally dissonant words/phrases:** Some phrases just do not translate across cultures, even across shared languages, such as English. For example, Americanisms slipping into a British character's vernacular and vice versa.

Just like a child learns from parents, and how close friends can pick up certain phrases from each other and adopt them as their own—so can your characters—either from yourself or from other characters! This can happen in both thought and dialog.

Being aware of this should help you spot any of these moments, and a helpful tip is to read your work out loud—or get someone else to read it to you—and carefully visualize your character as you do so. Can you picture your cultured, buttoned-up politician swearing like a trooper and complaining about the latest football scores, or a billionaire businessman exclaiming, "Oh, my goodness?"

Out-of-character physical movements

Human communication is heavily reliant on non-verbal cues. Even though studies cannot agree on what percentage is verbal vs non-verbal, the consensus is that most of communication is non-verbal. If you know your characters inside out, you should be able to imagine how they move their body not just to get around, but to also communicate.

How do they walk, how much do they use their hands to express themselves and what about their facial expressions? Now check in on how you have described your characters physically moving about—does it match with their traits, such as age, physical ability, but also their personality? How does it match up with their communication style?

Let's look at some examples:

- Your hero is in his thirties, a successful man who is fit and strong—do you think he would ever "wander" or "amble" into a room—or is he more likely to stride purposefully?
- Your heroine is described as warm, friendly and open—but we rarely see her smile, or make physical contact with others, such as a hand on an arm, or a sympathetic look.
- Your character is very prim and proper—would they use their hands to enthusiastically "hand talk" when they speak?

When it comes to physical movements, inconsistent or even lack of description, can undermine a character. Whereas, a little bit of detail here, can go a long way to adding a deeper dimension to your character and really bringing them off the page for your reader.

In conclusion, even when you think you've got the big stuff nailed down for your characters, the details trip you up. Here some final thoughts on why this is and what can you do about it:

- You don't know your character as well as you thought—you need to spend some more time getting to know them!
- You are writing against type and/or experience—you may need to consider whether this character is someone you can do justice to. More research into your character type is required to make sure they sound, act and behave authentically. Watch videos, documentaries, or better still—meet real-life people!
- You're subconsciously writing too much of yourself or the people you know in real life into your characters because that's what you know! Once you become aware you could be doing this, you open yourself up to spot it happening.

"You must know your character as you know yourself" is a phrase I must've repeated hundreds of times over the years and it is worth repeating again here. And if you *really* know your characters, *and* pay attention to the details, your reader will thank you!

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](#).

Does Your Swag Have Swagger?

By Linda Gilman



What is the one denominator that makes all writers equal? Readers. How do authors attract these loyal book-loving fans? The answer to that question has perplexed novelists for years.

Even before their book is released, most authors spend money on swag to hand out as giveaways at special events and book signings.

Usually the first promotional items writers invest in are bookmarks or postcards, sometimes referred to as flat materials. Authors soon learn that their printed swag does not stand out when piled on an event's display table with other authors' giveaways. In fact, all the printed bookmarks are similar in size, texture and book cover imagery. What do you think the readers do with all those bookmarks when they get home? Trash can? *I admit I am guilty of tossing all that printed stuff.*

Eventually, authors realize a more impressive swag is needed. If this new promo item serves a purpose, great. Readers appreciate useful swag. How many of you have purchased two kinds of swag? One cheap giveaway for everyone that walks by your table and a nicer item too costly to give away unless you sell a book. *Yep, ditto. I am guilty of that, too.*

Red flag alert! There is nothing unique about ink pens, plastic wristbands or a dish full of free candy. These commercially produced items certainly do not brand you. How did I come to this great swag awakening?

When I was a new author attending my first convention, I was a lone historical Western romance author in a room full of paranormal, young adult, and mystery-suspense authors and readers. I believed in the mantra that you must spend money to make money, so I purchased vast quantities of swag in the hopes it would draw me readers. Sadly, I discovered my swag was exactly like many other authors' freebies. At the end of the convention, I hauled my suitcase of giveaways back home, stuffed it all in a storage tub and put it on a shelf in my basement. It wasn't long before some of my swag became obsolete because my book's cover and title changed.

After a few years of purchasing not-working-for-me swag, I knew I needed something different. Something budget-friendly. Something unique and reader desirable. I did not want to repeat my storage and obsolescence issues of the past.

Since I am a big fan of Pinterest for its creative ideas, I started searching for craft projects that could easily become swag. One day, a kid's clothespin fish puppet caught my eye. I recreated that fish into a cowboy and made a hundred puppets.

At my next book signing, I gave away my handmade freebies. Shocker, the little cowboys flew off my table with rave reviews, but not before readers stayed to chat with me a few minutes. My newsletter mailing list filled up. I sold books. Wow! I had found a way to connect with readers.

From there, I took my creativity up a notch and made stagecoach and Conestoga wagon candy boxes. At my next book signing, readers made special trips to my table just to grab my swag, creating one-on-one moments to talk about my giveaway items and how they directly tied into the antics in my book, *The Suffragette Takes a Husband*.



My original handmade cowboy clothespin puppet



My covered wagon candy box

Are you ready for my secret for making reader connections? I call it *Stick-It Swag*. In a nutshell, make your swag have “sticking power” with readers. The swag either sits on a shelf or in their books as a “treasured keepsake.”

From this point on, for every piece of swag you purchase, think about its purpose. Your swag should be eye-catching, suggest your genre, promote you as an author, stand out in a roomful of less impressive giveaways. Your swag should be budget-friendly, easily transported, have author contact information, and most importantly, your swag should have *stick-it, retention power*.

To make this swag selection process easier, I created a star rating chart. One star means it is least impressive and five stars hits your swag goal.

VELCRO SWAG

5 star rating system



For example, let's rate that bowl of candy authors set out on their table. Candy rates zero. No stars. Why? Candy costs you money with absolutely no return on your investment. Candy in a bowl with a Hershey or Almond Joy label does nothing for your personal branding.

To earn stars, candy should be packaged in something related to you or your book. No matter how broad that connection, your packaging should draw readers to your table. That candy handout is now one star.

How do we get more stars? Can you celebrate a benchmark in your writing career? Is it the anniversary of your first book? Did you just make the *New York Times* list? Then make little "cake boxes" for your candy. Now you have a talking point with your readers, rating two stars. Three stars for newsletter sign-ups. Selling a book rates four stars. Swag so cute that it goes on a shelf in the reader's home as a treasured keeper with retention earns five stars.

Here are three examples of treasure keeper boxes likely to sit on a reader's shelf or desk for a long time.



Candy Curse box for fantasy authors

My Candy Curse box is simply three match boxes stacked on top of each other (the bottom box is slightly larger). I first printed three sheets of 8.5-inch by 11-inch leather looking paper. I varied the coloring slightly for each box. Using a strong quarter-inch double-sided tape, I assembled the boxes. Taking a cue from scrapbookers, I swiped a bit of brown stamp pad ink along all the edges of the boxes to give them an aged look. Next, I added 3D elements of hat and broom and printed a candy curse label for the inside of the pull-out box. This is an enchanting freebie giveaway.



Beach Hut Candy Box (side & back)

I happen to have a Cricut Explore Air 2 cutting machine which makes creating boxes a bit simpler. However, as mentioned previously, Pinterest has tons of box templates to get you started. The Beach Hut box is a simple gable box. Beach-themed 3D elements of surf boards, fencing, and a life preserver are put in place with foam mounting squares which add depth and extra pop to make this box stand out.

Do you write mystery or detective novels? Check out my detective's magnified eye.



Detective box with 3D element eyeglass

What about bookmarks? Bookstores have \$10 bookmarks at their checkout counters and people buy them. These bookmarks are generic. They have an image or a sentiment the reader is willing to pay for. I guarantee that those pricey page holders do not end up in a trash can and neither should yours.

Bookmarks should reach readers through imagery, sentiments or cute phrases. Author information should be on the back, not blatantly advertising “buy my book.” Once they finish reading their new favorite author (hopefully you), they can flip the bookmark over for your contact information. Five-star bookmarks are your goal.

Check out the following generic-themed shiny bookmarks. Each bookmark has a printed butterfly top layer, a slightly larger eye-catching foil middle layer, and lastly, I add a matching color cardstock backing. I used clear-gel tacky glue to bond all the layers. I press them flat by placing them under heavy books. When the glue has dried these bookmarks have cardstock durability.



Butterfly bookmarks

I used the same layering technique with my mermaid slider bookmarks and added 3D dimension elements.



Your bookmarks do not have to be overly fancy. Sentiments can carry a lot of emotion with readers. Simply printing quotes on quality cardstock and cutting them to a non-standard bookmark size can do the trick.

Humor always works as a draw as do these cute Critter Quotes bookmarks.



Remember, readers can be inundated with swag at conferences. You want something that will stick out and make your name and books be what they think of. Think five stars and you'll be a hit.

Linda Gilman is a historical Western romance author with three novels under her writer's belt. She's currently working on a contemporary mystery and she created her own Swag Crafter Shop on Etsy, where she creates unique, customized swag for authors wishing to make lasting connections with their readers. Email Linda at ljune59@gmail.com or reach her at <http://authorlindagilman.com/shop/>

14 Unique Ways To Increase Creativity

By Denise A. Agnew



We don't have to be experiencing life-altering situations to find a creative block growing wider every day. As professionals, we should be the last ones to have this problem, but often our adherence to repeating the same idea-generating tactics can become a cage in itself. Creativity, though, flourishes outside containment.

Below are ideas that take you outside the writing zone and can boost overall creativity. Some of these exercises may sound wild, but give them consideration.

Exercises

1. **Clean house randomly.** Many people clean house one room at a time. What if you clean part of a room, then move on to another room and clean part of that one? Then move back to the first room and then back to the second. Use this bouncing room idea until you've finished the two rooms. You can try this method for the entire house. For some people this is too chaotic. For others, it can cause the brain to think more randomly and therefore jog creativity.

2. **Draw something by tracing.** In this exercise you concentrate on getting it right. I used to think I couldn't draw anything, but back in my archaeology days, I discovered I can draw objects that I've traced.

Here's what you'll need to do:

- Grab a fresh piece of paper. Use a number-two pencil if you've got it. Keep an eraser nearby.
- Obtain a shell, small rock, crystal or button. If the object is elaborate in design, that's even better.

- Settle down at a time when you won't be interrupted. If you can find quiet, that's great, but if there is background noise (even soft music) this will give you a chance to improve concentration as a part of the process. When I used this method at an archaeological site, there was noise and people all around, so I trained myself to ignore everything but drawing the artifact.
- Place the small object on the paper.
- Use the pencil to trace around the object so you follow the outside curves and lines as closely as possible. Concentrate on the decorative features/qualities you see within the object. Take as much time as you need to replicate those inside structures and decorations within the area you traced.
- **Tip:** Look at the object frequently, then draw. Do this in short bursts, committing to memory what you see so when you look down at the paper you can draw bit by bit. If something goes astray it is okay to erase. If you're too much of a perfectionist, though, don't let this stress you out.
- My guess is that many of you will be surprised at how well you do at making the object look like the real thing. Celebrate! Give yourself at least 15 minutes to do some of this exercise. If you want to draw for longer, go for it, but if you'd rather stretch this project out over a few days, that is fine.

3. **Experiment with a drawing or coloring program** on your iPad, laptop, or other electronic device. Using a drawing or coloring program can be very freeing. My guess is that the ability to erase easily and start over is one of the things that appeals about this method.

4. **Buy adult coloring books and colored pencils.** You can find these in all subjects and colors, appealing to every notion. I have some castle and some Halloween themed books. I'll totally admit I adore coloring pencils with more than one color within the pencil. If you're so inclined, buy coloring books that appeal to the kid in you. If that means coloring in a child's coloring book, go for it.

5. **Do a problem-solving mind dump.** Before you hit the sack at night, write down a problem you want to solve. This can be an issue with your current writing project or something else. Don't spend too long on it, just specify what it is. Write next that you want your subconscious to help you work on the problem during sleep. You may discover the clue to your problem solves itself overnight or sometime during that next day. I've had this work on more than one situation.

6. **Dance to a favorite song** (with or without lyrics). Even if you can't dance, doing it anyway to a favorite song (fast or slow) can make those creative juices flow. In some ways it works like taking a walk. It increases blood flow and frees your mind to expand in many directions.

7. **Play a board game.** Many of us play games on our personal electronic devices. Yet there's something to be said for sitting down with another person and playing a game. It doesn't have to be one of the old ones like Clue or Monopoly. Dig around and search for a new one you've never heard of but appeals to your sense of fun. One I want to try is Betrayal at House on the Haunted Hill.

8. **Cook.** Even though I'm not much into cooking, ideas about a book/project have popped into my head while doing it. I'm interested in hearing if any of you have encountered the same thing. Many people find baking extremely creative.

9. **Increase curiosity.** Writers are nosy. Nosy sounds like a bad word, but being nosy can be a good thing. Creative people have to look at a situation or a project with fresh eyes that ask what, how and even maybe. Most of us are already good at researching a subject we find interesting. Take time every week to research a subject you wouldn't normally find appealing. An idea might jump out at you for a new writing project simply from something you discovered.

10. **Wear/purchase a clothing item you've always wanted to try.** You may be venturing out less because of COVID-19, but even if you're staying home, there's nothing that says you can't wear something you want to even if it's a tux or a fancy dress. I know, it sounds far out there and it is. So what? Enjoy it. Or, if you've wanted to slop around in pajamas or sweats and usually never get to wear them, try it now. Why not?

11. **Take a brain-switch moment.** Even those of us working from home (if we're conscientious) can find our brains slogging in a rut. Take breaks during the day and mean it. Give yourself permission to read for several minutes (in an area that isn't in a genre you're writing). This can include nonfiction. Switching into a different genre with your reading entertainment can mix things up and generate new ideas.

12. **Multi-genre brainstorming.** Working with another writer can be helpful when formulating new ideas for a project or digging your way out of a plot problem. A twist on that idea is to have a brainstorming session with a writer who works in a different genre. While you may not read in their genre and vice versa, that doesn't mean that they can't help you see an entirely different spin.

13. **Pocket notes.** Find a neat little purse/pocket-size notebook and keep it with you wherever you go. Get in the habit of writing down interesting things you notice while out and about. You never know when one of these ideas may spark just what you need for a current or future project.

14. **White noise.** You might think total silence or music works best to inspire you while at the keyboard. Consider white noise, using either a machine or a noise-generator app. I have one loaded on my iPad and my iPhone. Of all the nature sounds, I find the sound of a creek running or a gentle rain to be soothing and helpful when I think I've hit a story sticking point. So while a musical soundtrack is my go-to for creativity, I find white noise another great alternative. It's fantastic to fall asleep to as well.

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 and www.creativepencoaching.com.

The Mad Scribbler

COVID Diary

By Laura Resnick



"It is a truth universally acknowledged that when one part of your life starts going okay, another falls spectacularly to pieces."

—Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary*

March 10

Gala day! Much progress made on lengthy To Do list.

Today ends exhausting search for suitable apartment for recently widowed mother. Rental application filed, prompt acceptance anticipated!

Also, adoption application approved for two of my foster kittens who have been here nearly a year (and are no longer kittens). All that remains is for me to deliver them.

Eagerly looking forward to rewarding self for jobs well done today. Have tickets to attend concert tomorrow. Excellent band, historic concert hall, perhaps a meal out after the show!

March 11

Arrive at concert hall to learn performance has been canceled and excellent band is already on tour bus and fleeing city. Mayor has just made announcement about encroaching pandemic and banned all gatherings of more than 100 people.

Walking away, I contact boss of nearby walking tour company where I work part-time as a guide. Am informed we'll sanitize surfaces in the tour shop and will lavish hand sanitizer on guides and guests alike, no worries. We never take out groups of 100 people, so all is well.

I suddenly notice I'm standing alone in dark street known for drug dealing...

Because timing is so perfect, my mother phones. Her rental application has not been accepted, and I gather this is somehow *my* fault.

March 15

Better news. Rental company just wants additional information. Process has changed since last time Mom applied for apartment as 18-year-old bride during Kennedy administration.

While guiding tours today, everything feels strange. Co-workers and guests obsessively wash surfaces and hands every three minutes, people collectively flinch every time someone coughs or sneezes.

After talking to crowds for several hours, I develop frog in throat, choke a few times—and suspect anxious crowd is about to run screaming in mad stampede to escape contact with contaminated self.

Just as I finish final tour of weekend, boss checks in to tell me that, by order of the governor, we're closing until further notice.

"What did we do to upset the governor?" I ask.

"No, Laura, everyone in the state is closing. All non-essential businesses."

After discussing it, we conclude we should be prepared for shutdown to last as long as two weeks.

Which happens to be exactly how long I have vowed to self-quarantine, anyhow. Because tomorrow, I'm flying to Boston, a city already in grip of rapidly spreading virus.

March 16

I arise early (for me) and tranquilize Victor Laszlo and Ilsa Lund, two young cats from last year's *Casablanca* litter, so I can take them on airplane trip without risking damage to my cherished personal appendages.

Their adopter is fellow NINC member Linda Barlow (and her husband), who has followed their story for nearly a year on my Facebook page. Our rescue group normally never places cats in homes beyond our Cincinnati metropolitan area, but these are special circumstances.

Victor & Ilsa are great cats who've had consistently terrible luck (ex. promptly returned to me by a fantastic adoptive family... whose small child turned out to be severely allergic). I'm willing to risk this trip, as cities and states are shutting down all around us, because *that's* how much I want to place Victor & Ilsa in this great permanent home with someone I've known for many years.



Victor



Ilsa

At local airport, I say to airline employee at check-in counter, "Victor & Ilsa are catching the night plane to Lisbon!"

She stares at me blankly. I surmise she has never seen *Casablanca*.

Air transportation has been organized for me by accompanying friend, a flight attendant. After landing in Boston, we transfer the cats safely to their new family, who meet us at eerily quiet airport, then return to lounge to await flight home.

I notice some people in Boston airport wearing masks, though we've been told repeatedly that masks won't protect us and there's no point in wearing them.

March 17

First day of two-week quarantine. In a way, it's welcome. Have felt pulled in so many different directions for months. This is an opportunity to refocus and get lots of writing done!

March 24

After binge-watching *Great British Baking Show* for days, I cancel plans to attend a tribute to my late father in Los Angeles next month. Given worsening crisis, I'm starting to feel that attending his memorial might soon lead to *my* memorial.

March 30

So apparently we all should have been wearing masks if we didn't want to contract the virus.

Better late than never?

Am now cutting up fabric to sew own masks.

March 31

Have remembered that I don't sew.

April 2

Apparent to me by now that I'm not going back to guiding tours by end of March.

April 3

Still struggling to write April *Nink* column. Have settled on topic: how shutdown is affecting bookselling and publishing.

Reading draft of own column, really hoping I wake up soon and realize this was all just a weird dream.

April 8

Have organized cellar, cleaned under stove, completed paver patio (a billion years in the making), weeded yard, laid out several garden beds, watched complete run of *Father Brown Mysteries*, and learned to cook mung beans. Have also learned I hate mung beans.

Met with stranger in local park, to acquire homemade cotton masks in exchange for donation to local charity. Felt bizarrely like buying heroin or purchasing state secrets.

April 13

Still cannot find toilet paper, hand sanitizer, facial tissues, or bleach wipes at supermarket.

April 26

Book not going well. An under-contract volume in an ongoing series, it's a comedy set in current-day New York City... *Nothing* amusing about what's happening in NYC.

Maybe should turn instead to working on Dad's book. A few weeks before he died in January, he asked me to finish writing the half-complete final book of his Dreamscape Trilogy.

April 27

The old man's book is also set in contemporary New York City.

(head desk)

Maybe I'll use this time to learn to bake ciabatta.

May 3

It's May 3?

It's *May*?

Decide to write *Nink* column about quarantine brain fog. Research: turns out it's a Real Thing, not just me.

May 5

Bought toilet paper today—**score!**

Still no sign of hand sanitizer, facial tissues, or bleach wipes. Tofu also unavailable. *Tofu*.

May 8

Editor I have worked with many times reminds me I was supposed to deliver overdue short story today.

For a *humor* anthology. CRAP!

May 9

Story written and delivered!

May 10

With apology, editor rejects story.

OUCH.

Commissioned story. *Overdue* commissioned story.

So he *really* hated it.

May 14

As per editor's offer, I delivered replacement story today. Last-ditch extended deadline.

Really needed to get back on the horse right away. First fiction I've delivered in months rejected. Surprised by how much that shook my confidence.

Everything feels hyperreal.

May 16

After months of helping Mom empty out house, this week helping her move into apartment.

Today was the big day—movers! Moving truck! Heavy furniture! Phone and cable hook-up! Testosterone!

So tired and stressed, I only realize after several hours in small apartment with multiple workmen that none of us is wearing a mask.

May 18

Fever, sore throat, fatigue, dry cough.

(head desk)

Call multiple phone numbers listed as local COVID-19 testing sites.

No one answers. No one returns my calls.

And I've already watched all of *Father Brown*.

May 21

Feel better. No idea what I had (or still have?), but apparently going to live through it.

May 22

Editor has accepted replacement story. Yay! The pandemic hasn't washed away *all* my talent yet.

And... just found long-forgotten bottle of *hand sanitizer* sitting on a shelf with some cleaning supplies in upstairs closet. **Score!** Victory lap! High-fives all around!

May 28

Non-essential businesses re-opening soon, including walking tour company. Meet with boss to discuss new safety protocols (very small groups, masks, social distancing, etc.) and walk through changes in tour routes.

Boss seems glad to see me. Says he's tired of talking to his cat.

I don't tell him how much I talk to all of mine.

June 2

One of the testing sites calls me back!

Ten days after I left a message saying I had multiple symptoms and wanted to come in for a test.

June 6

First time guiding tours since shutdown began!

Soon start feeling lightheaded, guiding challenging two-hour tours back-to-back in the heat while wearing a mask; this will take some getting used to.

People on the tour almost ecstatically glad to be out of the house for a couple of hours.

June 24

On the way home from grocery store (facial tissues—**score!**), I stop off at gym to cancel my membership.

They offer me a "freeze" option, so I can remain a member without paying dues until I feel it's safe to return.

"Actually, I've belonged for five years and have come here twice in all that time."

They cancel my membership for me.

July 5

Friends in Michigan have to make an emergency road trip that will take them right past my house. This being the safest place for them to eat, drink, and use the bathroom, they stop here for an hour.

They're wearing the disposable masks that have recently become widely available. It makes them look like doctors.

All through dinner, I keep thinking they're going to weigh me or stick a test swab up my nose.

July 10

Animals didn't get the memo about the pandemic, so rescue work has continued throughout.

I've got an adult foster cat in my office who bites—hence her name: Puma.

And a new foster kitten arrives, hungry, lonely, and wheezing with upper respiratory infection.

I name him "Solo" because he was found all alone.

August 2

Cannot think of a topic for this month's *Nink* column. (Can't think at all lately.) Ask to take a pass this month—first time ever.

Brain feels like cotton candy most of the time.

At supermarket yesterday (do they just not *make* bleach wipes anymore?), I suddenly realized I was still in my pajamas.

August 14

Solo—fully recovered, vaccinated, and neutered—got adopted today!

And Zuri, the next kitten, arrived. Scared, lonely, and sick.

Get him settled, then go into my office. While I stare at the screen, Puma bites me.



Solo



Zuri

August 21

Dad's memorial service.

We've given up hope of an in-person gathering. Three different plans have been swept away by the virus; but it has taken less from us than from millions of others. So we're doing it online, via the North American Science Fiction Convention, which is all-virtual this year.

Pop chose to keep his illness secret to the very end, so his colleagues, his friends, his readers, and the many writers he mentored never got to say goodbye.

This is for them, and also for my mom.

August 30

It's been a tough summer. A tough year.

Tours have been mentally and logistically difficult, business and earnings *way* down, tempers in the neighborhood fraying.

Still helping my mom wrap up her old life and settle into her new one.

My yard looks really good.

I owe another short story soon, to a different editor, and need to focus and get it done—with much less drama this time.

Zuri is better, but not yet well.

I've finally got some clarity about these MSs I've been avoiding for months, and if I was "supposed to" do better than that—well, I didn't. So bite me. (Thank you, Puma.)



Puma

I don't know when the pandemic will end or who will still be standing.

But I do know that when this ordeal is finally over, I'm going to drive a stake through its heart. The way it has driven one through mine.

Laura Resnick hopes that you're safe and well.

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>

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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/>

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Welcome Packet: <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

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

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Central Coordinator

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Address changes may be made on the website.

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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.

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