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 **novelists,  
inc.**

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# *Nink* September 2018

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## President's Voice

*By Julie Ortolon*



It's September, which means I'm back from a vacation where I spent time with my family, the kids are back in school, and we are only a few weeks from the beach and a fabulous NINC conference and all the incredible sessions we've lined up.

NINC members share and share a lot, and starting November, your newsletter will feature conference reports, a membership benefit for those that can't attend. The conference will also be my last one while serving as your NINC president, so let me remind you that you have a few days left to vote for your new NINC board. There's a link in this issue.

Since joining NINC in 2001, I've watched the industry change a lot. The last 10 years, especially, have been a roller-coaster ride for a lot of us. If it weren't for NINC, I would have been stumbling in the dark during the ebook revolution. Having NINC members willing to blaze this exciting, and often scary trail together has been invaluable.

It's not surprising that Amazon, one of our conference sponsors, would like to hear some of our stories, as part of their sponsorship of our conference, here is a request they asked us to pass on via our newsletter:

**Subject:** *Nink x Kindle Direct Publishing | Stories from Self-Published Authors*

As a career novelist, have you found creative freedom through self-publishing? If so, we want to hear from you! Tell us how self-publishing started positive change in your life—maybe you love the creative control, the speed at which you can reach and delight your readers or how you've found success. Share your story by emailing it to [kdp-pr@amazon.com](mailto:kdp-pr@amazon.com) and include a link to your book on Amazon.

If you haven't published through KDP, but are curious to learn more about how you can self-publish, visit [www.kdp.amazon.com](http://www.kdp.amazon.com).

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As Labor Day marks the unofficial end of summer and the autumnal equinox marks the official start of fall, may your words flow and your creativity be unstoppable.

*Julie*

### **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](#). You can also [propose an article](#) or submit a [letter to the editor](#). And you can [buy a paperback copy](#) of the 2016 *Best of Nink!*

### **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/>

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*Julie Ortolon is a USA Today bestselling author of contemporary romance. First published by Dell Publishing in 2000, she has also written for St. Martin's Press, and Signet Eclipse. Since going indie in 2009, she has hit the Amazon Top 100 several times. One of her greatest joys is helping other authors find success. When not writing, she enjoys traveling the world with family and friends.*

## Side Hustles: Part Two

Advice from the editorial trenches for authors considering doing freelance editing

By Patricia Burroughs



*Editor's Note: Last month featured different ways for authors to generate income. This article debunks some of the myths surrounding being a freelance editor.*

There's a common misperception that freelance editing seems a natural second job for authors. However, being a professional writer doesn't qualify you to be an editor, and savvy beta reads aren't the same as professional editing.

Before you decide to hang up your editor shingle, it's important to understand what writers expect, and you need to be sure you have the credentials that give a writer confidence that you can actually provide them. Credentials many writers look for include, but aren't limited to the following:

- More and more freelance editors have an editing history at traditional publishers.
- Many have taken editing courses as part of their university education.
- Others earned certificates from organizations like [ACES: The Society for Editing](#) and [Editors Canada](#).
- Testimonials and word of mouth from successful writers who have used their services.
- Experience in specific genres that prove the editor understands the tropes, clichés and specific needs of the authors in that genre.

As you work to establish your editing services, be specific about what you are offering. **Developmental editing** addresses the big picture: questions the author had, story arcs, characterization, pervasive technical issues like info-dumps and confusing points-of-view, etc. It often includes a follow-up phone or Skype call to make sure the client understands the notes. Developmental editing can start earlier in the process if the writer wants help developing a plot, for example. **Critique** is a less common variation of developmental editing. The editor reads the manuscript and writes three-to-five pages of notes that address big picture issues in less detail.

**Line edits** come when all the story issues have been met. This is a line-by-line review of the text. You will point out awkward wording, areas that need to be clearer, etc. **Copy editing** deals with grammar, punctuation, spelling, and usage—the final, critically important details. Copy and line editing are sometimes combined in one pass. **Proofreading** is a good specialty if you're the type who will spot every typo or formatting problem in a manuscript. **Consulting** is an editorial role for editors with special knowledge. This might be advising an author on involved legal processes, medical issues, historical periods, etc. Your involvement might be a read-through with notes or you may be 'on call' to answer questions that come up during the writing process.

Freelance editors offer a number of suggestions for those wanting to join the profession:

- Start slowly.
- See how long it takes you to complete projects.
- Determine how good you are at scheduling.
- Don't let authors press you into rushing work and making commitments you can't fulfill.
- Build wiggle room into your editorial calendar.
- Communicate when scheduling issues arise. Don't leave authors in the dark.

Starting off is like any other job. It takes time to get established. You might start by offering free or deeply discounted edits to author friends. Word of mouth is how many writers find freelance editors. You should also add consulting and the specifics of your work to your website, and make business cards and swag. Some organizations for editors list members and services available.

Once a client is interested, you need to find out if you are a good fit for the author by getting writing samples, which is also a way the client can decide if you are the right editor for them. This leaves a graceful escape clause for both parties. Five pages is the most common length for a writing sample, while up to 2,000 words or another specific word count works better for some, such as the entire first chapter. You can also charge a reasonable rate for two hours of editing their work instead of requesting a sample.

Before you read a word, sample or otherwise, ask the writer what they hope to accomplish with this book or project. Do they want to sell to a traditional publisher because they're hoping for major awards? Do they hope to hit *The New York Times* Best Sellers list? Do they hope to improve their books and/or writing because they feel that not having professional editing has hurt their book sales? Are they changing genres? What do they want the reader to feel when they close the book? What experience do they expect the reader to have? You need to know their intent in case it's not visible on the page before you can advise them.

Once you've decided to undertake a project, creating a fill-in-the-blank form for an author to complete can save you a lot of time and headaches. A style sheet will include the proper spellings of the names, places, etc. on the planet in their manuscript so you have a quick, easy reference at hand. It could also include the spelling the writer prefers in words that have more than one. This is especially important if you're [for example] an Aussie editing for a British English writer whose publisher expects consistent British usage. If the author is a stickler for

Oxford commas or has made other deliberate choices you might ordinarily change, you need to know it and if necessary, discuss it. Find more style sheet basics at sites like [this one](#).

Also during editing, don't do more than you need to. Mark a problem and explain why it's a problem and how to fix it. Do not fix it every other place it crops up in the manuscript. Mark them as you see them, but leave the work to the writer. The same goes for any other persistent problems they have. Mark, correct, and explain the first time, then moving forward, only mark.

Finally, there are some pitfalls to watch out for when freelance editing, and you might want to remember the phrase "Life is too short." Many freelance editors express regrets that they ever took on projects where the client reactions to the samples seemed irrational or unreasonable. Avoid taking on something you will hate working on or hate yourself for working on. If a manuscript is so lacking that its editing will be too expensive and/or is too tedious but you still want to help, you might offer to edit a small portion of the book so the client knows what needs to be done to bring it up to a standard that it is ready for more comprehensive editing.

It's also important to never let authors list you as editor on Amazon or elsewhere. As one freelance editor advised, "You have *no control* over what happens to that manuscript once it's out of your hands. An author listed me as editor on a nightmare project [evidently to prove he'd paid an editor since he didn't implement a fraction of my edits]."

Freelance editors edit because they love stories and also for the money. The [Editorial Freelancers Association](#) lists rates and job descriptions on its website. Your pricing should be in line with others, as writers can visit these websites and find out how much editing costs. You will have to decide if you will charge by the page, the word, or the project? Standard is to require half up front and don't send the copyedited manuscript back until the rest is paid.

Your job is to deliver a solid edit on time and to help the author make the project the best it can be. However, "best" is a subjective idea influenced by the author's skill level among other things, as "best" may not be the best book ever and it may not be the way you would write the book. This is one of those cases where understanding the writer's intent for the manuscript may guide you in your edit.

Finally, remember the book is someone's dream. Be tactful and positive. No writer is hopeless. There are successful writers who were almost illiterate when they began, but were so convinced they had stories to tell, they kept after it until they were able to tell those stories, and tell them well. Treat every writer's issues as problems that can be fixed and tell them how. If it will take a gargantuan amount of work to do so, let them know in a way that doesn't devastate them. You don't want to be the dream crusher. You want to be the professional adviser whose suggestions will help an author get closer to publication (and get paid while doing it).

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*Pooks (a.k.a. [Patricia Burroughs](#)) loves Pratchett, Aaronovitch, Dunnett, and Heyer for starters. Pooks is a novelist, screenwriter, short story writer, and short story anthology editor. She is also an Academy Fellow, having received the Academy Nicholl Fellowship in Screenwriting (awarded by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences). She is currently completing *The Fury Triad*, the award-winning YA romantic fantasy series that has taken over her life and heart. No editorial job is in danger of going horribly, horribly wrong from her inept touch because she knows better. No editors may have been harmed in the editing of this piece, but that is for someone else to determine.*

# The Ins & Outs of Critique Groups: Part Two

## Maintaining a group

*By Michele Dunaway*



*July's Part One focused on several long-term critique groups and how they organized. This month's article focuses on the structures needed to maintain those groups.*

### **Set the ground rules**

One of the first things your group needs to do is establish its ground rules. Having specific standards that the group will adhere to will help the group function and keep emotionality to a minimum. First, decide on your membership criteria. Will the group be open to everybody no matter what you write? How many books does the author need to have? What is the membership criteria? What size do you want?

Author Nancy Herkness and Lisa Verge Higgins belong to the same critique group, which is over 10 years old.

"Our group has a fairly serious set of ground rules because we are serious writers," Herkness said. "When a new member joins, we go through the rules with her when we invite her into the group, then reiterate and clarify them during the first meeting. If she isn't comfortable with them, she is free to decide not to join."

Your group will also need to decide what genres to read. Setting up the parameters of what you want to critique will save headaches in the long run, especially if several of your members have no desire to read or write in one genre. Deciding what genres you are willing to critique goes along with your group's purpose and goals.

While author Jacqueline Diamond's critique group, Orange County Fictionnaires, has everything from romance to mystery, fantasy and humor, for Verge Higgins and Herkness, they keep the focus narrow. "All the writers are local romance or women's fiction writers," Verge Higgins said. "Because we share a genre, we're all familiar with the tropes and expectations, which helps in critiquing. We can also keep each other up to date on the business."

While writing is creative, it is also a business. Thus, your critique group should not be purely a social club. Your group can have social time, but use it as a reward for getting the writing job done. Establishing some benchmarks, such as how much work members should have accomplished before the next meeting (such as page count) or a manuscript completion



date can help members be focused and on task. Having a partial ready for submission or contest entry is also a good goal. Be sure to also work in some reward time and celebrations for hitting your targets.

“Our critique group is founded on the expectation that we are all professional, working writers,” Herkness said, “so we need to keep producing. Therefore, every member is almost always creating new work that needs critiquing. It is understood that you must make the time to critique others’ work in order to receive a critique of your own.”

The last consideration and reason for setting rules is to establish group trust. In a face-to-face group, members bring pages in and collect them. The author is in control of her product the entire time. In an online group, members exchange over email. There are horror stories of critiqued work ending up in someone else’s manuscript. Whether true or not, these rumors do make one paranoid. So online groups have a few different issues and ground rules to cover. Your group must establish trust so that members feel comfortable in sharing with each other. Having clear expectations helps with this.

### **Establish a schedule**

Your group needs to decide how it is going to meet. Is this an online group? A face-to-face group? A phone group? No matter what you decide, you still need to set up when you want to meet, how often to meet, how long to meet and your attendance requirements. Establishing a rule that says you must be present at the meeting before you read, for example, could help to alleviate those members who only show up when they have something they want critiqued. Discussing with your group how often you think members should be there is very important, especially if your group is small. If guidelines are set up in advance, this will also make things less emotional if you must ask a member to leave because of poor attendance.

“People have missed meetings, but it’s rare,” author Elaine Fox said. “You want to have the camaraderie and enjoy the reading/reviewing. And if life circumstances keep people from attending a meeting, of course we understand. The other day we even did a video-meeting over our computers because we couldn’t physically get together. Not quite as much fun, but definitely effective and better than nothing.”

One suggestion is that once your group starts meeting, be sure to stick to your time frame. If you are critiquing for two hours, then hold to two hours. Sure, you might go over by five minutes if someone is still talking, but hold as close to your time as possible. If you choose to hang and socialize afterward, that’s fine. But, like a business meeting, your members should know that they can schedule things around your meeting as it will run on time.

To help your group remain on time, you may want to designate one person to be the facilitator. This person keeps the time. If you have two hours and are doing two critiques, each one might get forty-five minutes. The other thirty minutes would be used for a break, going over rules, announcements, and other business. Put a time limit on a member’s first critique comments. For example, depending on your group’s size, after a reading you could allow a maximum of three minutes per person until all have had a turn. Then the floor could be reopened. This eliminates the long-winded talker who takes up the entire time, shutting everyone else out.

### **Decide whether you're going to read aloud, read silently, trade pages in advance, etc.**

Depending on how you meet, you will also want to decide how you want to critique. Reading aloud allows for everyone to hear the story. The downside is if someone isn't a good reader it can hurt the story. The upside is that this allows for a cold reading for all. Reading silently is another option. However, the downside here is that you can't hear the author's tone. Another downside is that some read faster than others. The silence gets a little unnerving as well. But for some groups, this really works. Either reading aloud or silently allow for the reading to be fresh at that moment. Trading pages in advance allows for more time to focus on the critique. The downside is that the work is being remembered and not necessarily fresh. Also, if some members didn't read the work in advance, then they can't participate. Your group needs to establish what it wants to do before meeting. You can always change it with a group consensus. Most groups who responded to my questions share the work a week in advance so that the critique meeting can focus on discussion and not a reading of the material.

### **Give an honest critique during the discussion portion**

Now comes the hard part. How do you give that constructive criticism about someone's baby in such a gentle and tender manner that you don't hurt her or his feelings?

"I always want honesty above all and I worry that the love of one another gets in the way," Marsha Nuccio, who writes as Emelle Gamble, said. "I think we can all read one another well and know what they want. As for what they need? I guess someone would drop out if they weren't getting what they needed. I think I would."

"I thrive on praise," Mary Blayney said. "Yes, occasionally one of us will beat a horse to death and I want to yell 'STOP!' but somehow, despite the friction that can cause, we still believe in each other and trust group judgment."

One suggestion for critiquing was to discuss the story, not grammar, etc. Start with what you really liked about the work or what really struck you with the piece. If you see grammar and punctuation errors, circle or correct them on the manuscript so the author can fix them later, but don't give in to the temptation to reword the author's work. Her voice is not your voice. If you do feel strongly that a sentence can be improved, make the suggestions in written form, on the manuscript itself, using the comment function.

When doing the oral critiquing, focus your comments on the craft aspects. Is the plot working? The setting? Are the characters dynamic and sympathetic? Do they have grounded motivations? If something is lacking or missing, be kind and constructive. Tearing someone else down (even if the work sucks) is not beneficial to anyone.

"When critiquing, it's just as important to point out the positive elements as the negative ones," Herkness said. "We don't do this just to be nice; we do this so each writer will know what strengths she should play to."

If you've read the work and don't understand, be sure to ask questions if you want clarification from the author. Finding out what the author's intent is for the scene and the work can strengthen your critique. If you have questions, you may ask them before commenting. If the author has a specific problem they've asked about, now is the time to offer suggestions or

thoughts. At all times, be sensitive.

“If the story doesn’t work for me, I say so, explain why, and ask questions that I hope will help the author figure it out,” author Barbara Meyers said. “I expect the same in return.”

### **Be open to constructive criticism**

This is hard. Your book is like your child.

“One of our guidelines is that while your work is being critiqued, you can’t defend it or explain it,” Herkness said. “Otherwise, you are too busy thinking about what to say and not listening to the critique.”

Since you don’t have to make any changes unless you want to make them, listen to all the comments and take notes. If you want to know more about why someone holds a particular opinion, ask for clarification.

“One of the most important things a critique group can teach you is how to take criticism. I felt perfectly comfortable making changes my editors wanted and discussing why some things would or wouldn’t work because of my critique group,” Fox said. “It was invaluable having the experience of another person’s input on my work so that I learned how to (a) take it gracefully, and (b) evaluate what would work for me/the book and what wouldn’t, and how to communicate back.”

### **Leaving a critique group**

Leaving a critique group should be like resigning from a job.

“When one member isn’t working out, it becomes pretty clear,” Herkness said. “The awkward part is how to gently tell that member that there’s a problem. So far we’ve only had to do it once. We tried to work with the member to improve things and spoke with her several times about the specific issues we were having. She finally understood that it was not a good fit and resigned on her own. That’s the best possible outcome.”

So if you want to resign, all you need to do is provide notice. If a critique group is not working for you, a brief email simply stating that “It’s not working for me” or “I don’t have time in my schedule,” is about all that needs to be said aside from wishing the remaining members the best. If you are leaving because one member was driving you nuts, don’t say this. Just say goodbye and go. Be sure to leave on good terms, because you may want to critique with one of these people in the future and you also don’t want to burn bridges or lose friendships over a critique. So a cardinal rule is the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Thus, never ever talk bad about one member of the group with other members of the group (or any other chapter members). Don’t air dirty laundry. Everyone knows that what happens in Vegas doesn’t stay there—it ends up in the tabloids or on reality TV.

“It’s a balancing act, for sure,” Fox said. “Feelings can get hurt, motivation can be sapped and projects can be abandoned.”

For those members left in the group, don’t take a member’s leaving personally. Sometimes groups simply outlive their usefulness. Like the tides, groups will have ebbs and flows as members reevaluate their writing and simply decide to move on. Verge Higgins and Herkness’s group took time to build.

“It took a while for the new group to be stabilized,” Verge Higgins said. “Some writers couldn’t keep up with the monthly schedule due to other obligations. Others found that they only had one book in them. This is natural evolution. I’m not sure there’s any shortcut to forming an effective, wonderful critique group. First efforts might not always pan out. My advice would be to try to find fellow writers who are persistent, professional, kind, and respectful, and don’t stop until you do.”

Spending time dwelling on what went wrong when a member leaves is counterproductive to the remaining members. A suggestion would be to take some time to reassess your group’s goals, rules, and norms. Change what needs changing and then go forward.

“There’s nothing wrong with admitting you’ve outgrown a critique group or partner and are ready to move on,” Meyers said. “You don’t have to put it in those words, but why waste time if it’s not helping you? The others need to understand this is a business and we all need to make decisions that help us move forward in our writing process and our careers.”

### **Remember your group is unique**

Whatever your group, it’s important to remember that your group is unique. You’re going to read stories about best-selling authors and their best-selling author critique partners. You’re going to read about critique groups who give themselves fancy names, establish an internet presence and seem to—wham—get every member of their group sold somewhere while your career is stalled. It’s enough to give you a complex. Don’t let it. Focus on your group and your books.

“The obvious clichés are the foundation,” Nuccio said. “Meet regularly. Read the work. Share the load re: food, drink, cleanup. Don’t brag if you’re better career-wise than everyone. Have your partner’s back if they believe they are doing the right thing creatively and you can’t quite see it. Keep an open mind. Love them.”

“Much more often than not I, personally, feel motivated, inspired, and stronger for hearing how my story is coming across. I know that everyone in the group wants to HELP, and I know when something is just one person’s pet peeve and can be taken with a grain of salt, and when it’s a tough comment to hear but ultimately needs to be acted on,” Fox said. “Of course this latter circumstance sometimes takes a couple days to sink in, but I am always glad when I’ve worked through the tough love and my resistance, and realized that yes, I DO need to tear that scene/chapter/section apart and retool it. The book is inevitably stronger, and that is the point.”

*Editor’s Note: Next month’s issue features an article on using beta readers and freelance editors.*

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*Michele Dunaway serves as Nink editor and writes contemporary romance.*

# Out of Ideas?

## Unplug

*By Denise A. Agnew*



Tired. Unenthusiastic. Down-in-the-dumps. Out of ideas. Not creative.

Do any or all of these feelings apply in your creative journey or maybe in your life itself? If so, it might be time to unplug. A little down time from the modern world can go a long way toward sparking creativity. Don't worry. I'm not talking about a permanent change or even a long one.

### **Before high tech**

Think about how many high-tech conveniences are in your life. Smart phones. Tablets. Computers. Televisions. These items can make living easier in so many ways. Until they don't.

I'm old enough to remember when our television only had four channels. There were no personal computers. No cell phones. No tablets. How did I live without all the conveniences I have now? Perfectly fine, thank you.

Because our conveniences have become a habit, we sometimes forget (if we are old enough to remember the good ole, bad ole days) that we navigated the world well without them. People wrote entire books without personal computers.

Writer's block certainly happened before these conveniences were created. However, with the advent of modern technology came more ways to become mentally exhausted, distracted, and less creative.

What is this distraction really about?

### **Procrastination and resistance**

Before high tech, there were plenty of ways to become sidetracked while writing. Doing the laundry, washing dishes, your other day job, or watching *Gunslinger* could take priority. You name it, there was always a way you could *not* write your book. Procrastination and resistance aren't really new things in the world of writing. But when you add in technology, you have another way to get sidetracked or procrastinate. Why? Because you're afraid of the writing, that

you don't have good ideas, and that your words suck. It is, sometimes, easier not to write, and technology allows you to escape into social media or watch puppy videos. You feel connected, even though you're really not, and suddenly hours have gone by.

Procrastination enabled by high tech is your enemy.

In his book *The War of Art*, Steven Pressfield refers to this enemy as resistance. Resistance guarantees you will manufacture any excuse not to sit rear in a chair and write. With high tech available, it is even easier for you to resist writing.

### **Wrangling the high-tech monster—reasons to rein it in**

What can you do to cut back on the procrastination and resistance created by high-tech distractions?

#### *\*Make Your Writing Time Sacred*

This means find a time of day when you're going to write that novel. Make the time sacred. During that time there's no social media, no television. Turn off the cell phone notifications with the exception of emergency notifications.

#### *\*Decrease Your Social Media Time*

Social media, of course, is hard for many of us to avoid. If you're a writer, you may not wish to ditch all of your social media. You may have groups or other contacts and promotion you want to maintain. Whatever social media you use now, consider carefully how much time you need to spend utilizing it. Design a plan to take a bite out of this time you spend on social media and see your creativity grow. There's another good reason you might want to cut down on social media.

A recent article in *Medical Daily* discusses the link between depression and social media interaction. Excessive time on social media per day can aid and abet a slide into depression, especially for people who are already prone to depression. Like anything else, a little goes a long way.

#### *\*Slow Down News Media Consumption*

No matter your social or political proclivities, watching too much news can make a serious dent in your creative time, not to mention your mental health. As mentioned earlier, there was a time when many of us didn't have 24-hour news availability. Now you can find out anytime of the day what is happening around the world. While some see this as a positive thing, news can also give you a reason to be anxiety filled and angry at anytime of the day. A constant bombardment of bad news usually won't make you more creative. It's more likely to place a kibosh on your mind's ability to concentrate on creating a story.

#### *\*Go Old Fashioned Sometimes*

If you're an ebook reader (as I am) consider reading a paperback. If you always write on a computer, try handwriting. It may seem like a pain-in-the-neck idea, but the change can trick your mind into a different way of looking at what you are writing and your creativity. I'm not

advocating for never using your computer or reading an ebook. Just consider changing it on occasion for a fresh perspective.

*\*Schedule More Human Interaction*

Yes, even introverts need social interaction. It is too easy to let social media do our socializing for us. Leaving your house and getting into a situation where you must interact with people can prove essential to mental health. These interactions don't even have to be a big deal. Go out for coffee. Say hello to a neighbor. Set up a play date for your kids or fur babies. Whatever socializing you do, it doesn't have to be enormous to result in better mental health and improved creativity. Think of it this way: When you venture out into the world, you'll discover even more ideas for the novel you're writing or the one you will write.

If you try these tips, I hope you'll drop me a note and let me know how they work for you.

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*Denise A. Agnew is the award-winning author of over 67 novels. Denise's novels Love From the Ashes and Blackout were optioned for film/TV by Where's Lucy? Productions. Denise is a writer/producer (Happy Catastrophe Productions/Bright Frontier Films/Where's Lucy? Productions), a paranormal investigator, Reiki Master, Certified Creativity Coach, and RT Academy Mentor. As a creativity coach, Denise assists anyone in the 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).*

# Watch Out for the Theta Roles!

Never mind passive voice — it's all about your cast list

By James Harbeck



We **have** all been taught to be leery of the passive voice—sorry, make that *we have all learned* to be leery of the passive voice—because passive voice focuses on the recipient of the action rather than the actor. But we often get it wrong—such as when a news story or headline is criticized for using the “passive,” odds are high that it’s actually written in the active voice, it’s just evasive in some other way.

For instance, here are a few real-world examples of active voice misidentified as passive. When Janet Jackson had her famous “wardrobe malfunction” at the Super Bowl, one writer tut-tutted another for using the passive by writing the following: *A snap unfastened and part of the bodice tore*. But although that sentence doesn’t name Justin Timberlake, it isn’t passive voice either—to be passive, the sentence would need to say *a snap was unfastened*. Other typical examples of misidentified passives include *An accidental discharge of the firearm occurred* and *Boy dies as troops fire on demonstration*. In spite of writers inveighing against other writers for using “the passive,” these sentences have no *is* or *was* and no past participle—to be passive, they would have to be written as *The firearm was accidentally discharged* and *Boy is killed as troops fire on demonstration*.

So how did we get so far off base in telling the passive voice from the active voice? The answer is that we’re not off base at all; we’re asking the wrong question. It’s not really the passive we should be looking out for. It’s the theta roles.

Does a theta role sound like something from science fiction? It’s better than that: it’s linguistics. Linguistics is that branch of the social sciences that consists mainly in discovering that almost everything you were ever taught in school about language is wrong, and what’s right mostly isn’t right for the reasons you thought.

Your teacher probably said that a verb is an action, and the subject of the verb is the one doing the action. But that’s often not true, as we’ll see. It’s better to look at a sentence as a



theatre where every verb casts nouns in different kinds of role. These roles that the nouns play are called theta roles (coincidentally an anagram of *lo, theatres*). The catch is that different verbs cast for different roles. Even the star of the play—the subject—can portray several different kinds of roles. Change the verb and you can change the role of the subject.

## Agent

In show biz, an actor needs an agent, but in theta roles, the actor *is* the agent. When your verb assigns this agent role to the subject, your subject is doing an act that changes something. In *Justin unfastened a snap*, Justin is the agent and the snap is what we call the patient. By unfastening, Justin has changed the state of the snap, causing a string of controversy and outcry. Not every agent has a patient—in *Jill ran*, Jill is an agent, but she's not acting on anyone or anything else. She's simply running. Some linguists also distinguish forces of nature as a different role: in *An avalanche destroyed the house*, the avalanche isn't doing it on purpose; it's just laws of physics operating automatically. We often use verbs such as *happen* to present a thing actually done by human agents as a force of nature: *So this thing happened between us*.

## Patient

A patient, as described directly above, is a role that undergoes some change because of the verb. We usually think of this as the object of a verb, but some verbs can also cast the subject as the patient.

One set of verbs that can do this includes ones such as *unfasten*, *tear*, and *break*. When one of these verbs has both a subject and an object, the subject is the agent and the object is the patient: *Justin unfastened a snap*. But when the verb has no object, the subject is the patient, and the agent is nowhere to be seen: *A snap unfastened*.

Many other verbs that don't take objects also cast their subjects as patients: *The tree fell*. Even verbs that may seem active can have a patient as the subject: *The tree grew five inches*. Growing is not like throwing; growing is a change of state you undergo while throwing is something you do. You can use a different verb to present the subject as an agent: *The tree reached toward the sun and got five inches closer*.

## Theme

A theme is like a patient, but theme doesn't undergo a change of state: *The book sat on the pile of papers*. This lack of state change is not always clear-cut, as in *The candle burned all night*. Figures of speech can change the role: *The book rotted on top of a pile of papers* makes the book a patient because it's not acting but it's changing; *The book pushed a pile of papers earthward* makes the book an agent (or a force of nature). In case you're wondering, in the latter example the papers have the role of patient; in the former, they're the location. (Location comes up below, don't worry.)

## Experiencer

What about a verb such as *died*? Died is a change of state, but it doesn't receive an action (*was killed* does). There are many verbs that involve no action, just an experience: in I saw how

you felt when you heard he had died, there are four verbs (*saw, felt, heard, died*) and every one of them assigns the role of experiencer to its subject. When you *read* you're an experiencer; when you *lend me your eyes* you're an agent. And when you *learn* you're also an experiencer, just like when you *are taught*.

Some verbs assign different roles depending on how they're used. If I say *I felt cold* or even *The chair felt cold to me*, I am the experiencer. But if I say *I felt the seat of the chair with my hand*, I'm an agent.

### **Instrument, location, goal, source**

There are some roles that subjects only occasionally play. These roles are more often seen after prepositions. In *The frying pan dented his head*, the frying pan is the instrument; we could say *She dented his head with the frying pan*. In *Paris hosted the games*, Paris is the location; we could say *The games took place in Paris*. In *A column of smoke guided me to your house*, the column of smoke is the goal; we could say *I went toward a column of smoke to find your home*. And in *The garden provided our salad*, the garden is the source; we could say *Your salad came from the garden*. These verbs all normally assign other roles to their subjects, but in these examples the nouns are understudies standing in.

### **Stimulus**

Experiences often have stimuli. So do some actions. If *Miranda's suit inspired you to throw out your entire wardrobe*, you are the agent of *throw out* but the experiencer of *inspired*, and *Miranda's suit* is the stimulus. A stimulus is not an agent. When you say *Those speakers really moved me*, unless the speakers physically displaced you, they are the stimulus. This can be a fine distinction to spot: in *She led her team to great success*, she is the stimulus; in *She led her dog to the fire hydrant*, she is the agent.

### **Recipient**

We usually think of the recipient as the indirect object of a verb, as in *You sent me a letter*. But when I say *I got your letter*—or, obviously, *I received your letter*—I am the recipient and I am the subject of the verb. *I accepted his swinging fist into my mouth* also makes the subject the recipient, ostensibly (but probably not really) by choice.

### **Beneficiary**

There is a difference between *beneficiary* and *recipient*. You can receive something without it being of benefit to you (a fist, for instance), and you can benefit from something without receiving it (praise, for example). In *I won the lottery*, I am the beneficiary, while in *I won the money* I am the recipient. If your book *garnered glowing reviews*, it is the subject and the beneficiary.

So you see, it's really about what theta roles the verbs you choose cast the nouns in. Linguists argue over the exact list of roles, but as a writer you don't need to be technical, just

aware. You're the director of this theatre. You don't want to star an action hero in every sentence, but you do want to be clear on who you're really presenting as doing and receiving the action, and how.

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*James Harbeck is a linguist, editor, educator, and writer. He is author of the blog [Sesquiotica](#) and the books [Songs of Love and Grammar](#) and [Confessions of a Word Lush](#) and co-founder of the group blog [Strong Language](#) (NSFW). His articles have appeared on [TheWeek.com](#), [BBC.com](#), [Slate.com](#), [UrbanAdventures.com](#), and elsewhere. He is available for hire at [jamesharbeck.com](#).*

## Working With Librarians: Part Two

Should you attend a state library conference?

By Barbara Meyers



*Obscure author seeks multiple readers for long-term relationships.*

Since the annual Florida Library Conference would be held in nearby Orlando, I decided attending this past May could be a worthwhile experiment. A table cost \$50 for two hours, or \$150 for an entire day, so I chose Thursday. To get insight on how best to prepare, I asked a librarian in my local writer's group what to expect.

He told me that I would sell some books and that librarians are booklovers who might either buy for themselves or for their libraries. *Wrong.* Not that librarians aren't booklovers, but I didn't sell any books. None of the other 10 authors sold books either. Note to self: a library conference is not about immediate book sales.

My librarian friend also told me to bring candy and to have an information sheet and bookmarks on hand. My two-sided info sheet listed my books available both in print and on OverDrive. I also included information about my experience, speaking engagements, and social media. I discovered librarians do like bookmarks. My friend also told me the library conference would be similar to the state writers' association conference we'd both attended, with lots of people milling around at all times, especially between workshops and during the lunch break. Again, wrong.

The information I had from the library association indicated an attendance of 700, which included attendees and vendors. I did not see anything indicating those kinds of numbers. However, there were a *lot* of vendors in one huge ballroom. Food could be purchased in the center of the space. The author tables were arranged along one side of the *freezing* room, so it's possible many attendees never made it that far or simply weren't interested. Or perhaps they were more interested in or required to attend the sessions. If our tables were set up closer to the food, maybe there'd have been more traffic.

While I expected to sell at least a few books, what I hoped for was to make contact with librarians throughout the state, especially those looking for authors willing to do panel

discussions, workshops and/or participate in their programs. My plan was to create a newsletter specifically for librarians to inform them of my new releases, and to remind them of my availability for personal appearances.

This outreach effort was more successful. I created a gift basket with coffee and chocolate and a couple of my books and a few other goodies as a prize for anyone who signed up for my newsletter.

The first person that signed up was from the county where I'd previously lived for 30 years and where I still visited. She was planning an event for September. Would I be interested? Yes! I would! I took her invite as a good omen. My local librarian also stopped by and mentioned an author event in the works for October.

As always, at any event I attend with my author hat on, I found the biggest benefit the personal connections I made. In this case, I networked with other authors, a couple of vendors, and several librarians. Like the ripples in a pond, I threw my pebble out there in an attempt to expand my reach, find readers, and increase book sales.

In the end, even though I sold no books, I added 14 names to my newsletter. That's potential contact with about one-fifth of the county libraries in my state. I also took a picture of me holding a bunny named ChaChing (who I now follow on Facebook). To continue making connections, I gave two complimentary books to the male vendors that showed interest in my only non-romance book. I made them both a deal: I'll give you the book if you'll write an Amazon review after you read it. They agreed, but of course, there are no guarantees. Still...it's another pebble dropped into the pond.

One of the librarians recognized my name because my books are in her library. "Are you sure it's me?" I asked. (Because I'm not even the first Barbara Meyers in my own family nor in my current neighborhood. And because I was published by a now defunct small publisher.) She double-checked my nametag and said, "Of course. We love Florida authors." Another librarian pointed to a copy of NINC's *I Never Thought I'd See You Again* anthology and said, "I've read that."

Will I ever do another library conference? Based on the results of this one, probably not. If I do, I'd bring only enough books for a minimal display. The value of attending library conferences is in making contacts and interacting with other attendees.

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*When not writing, [Barbara Meyers](#) disguises herself behind a green apron and works part-time for a world-wide coffee company. Her novels mix comedy, suspense and spice, cross the line between contemporary romance and women's fiction, and often feature a displaced child. Her latest novel is *White Roses in Winter*.*

# The Mad Scribbler

## My heroes have always been heroines

By Laura Resnick



*“Can't we just be seen? Can't we have adventures? Can't we fight zombies and ride hippos and go to space and summon demons and do everything else that we've been letting 'the default' do all along?”*

—Hugo & Nebula Award-winner Seanan McGuire aka Mira Grant

When I was a child, my favorite role models were all fictional women.

I admired Nancy Drew, the teenaged amateur sleuth, who solved intriguing mysteries in dozens of novels. There was also Beverly Gray, another mystery series heroine (26 books, published 1934-1955); unlike Nancy Drew, Beverly Gray got older as the series progressed, graduating from college and becoming a reporter. Lieutenant Uhura, another favorite of mine, was the communications officer aboard the starship *Enterprise* in *Star Trek*. And Mrs. Emma Peel, from the same era as *Star Trek*, was the daring female protagonist of *The Avengers*, an amusing and eccentric TV series about a pair of British spies.

These female characters all inhabited important and dangerous roles, whether as amateurs or professionals. They had interesting, adventure-filled lives. Uhura, who was part of a command team, functioned at a high level during battles, crises, and emergencies. Beverly and Nancy solved mysteries and confronted villains. Mrs. Peel was portrayed as more intellectual than her male colleague—the dashing John Steed—and equal to him in bravery, endurance, and skill. Additionally, in an era where independent women were often presented as unappealing, these heroines were all portrayed as attractive and desirable. Nancy and Beverly had boyfriends; Uhura and Mrs. Peel were sexually confident and experienced.

My strong attachment was because they were all successful female adventure protagonists—and there weren't many of those when I was a girl.

Before I could read, my father (a writer) regularly made up bedtime stories for me in which I rescued Batman, Tarzan, and other famous heroes from peril. But as I grew up, I discovered that many storytellers portrayed only male characters as heroic and adventurous. Portrayals of women in the kind of adventure-driven books, movies, and TV shows that I liked were usually so disappointing that in my head I was constantly rewriting new versions of them, creating female characters who took charge, faced danger, and bested the bad guys.

So Nancy, Beverly, Uhura, and Mrs. Peel have always meant a lot to me, and well into adulthood, I love female adventure characters like Xena the Warrior Princess, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and Princess Leia Organa—as do millions of others.

We are drawn to fiction for all sorts of reasons: exploring lives unlike our own, expanding our horizons, and seeing the world from a different point of view. But we also read fiction to find characters we can identify with and /or see as our personal role models: *This character is how I was, or how I sometimes am, or how I would like to be.*

Since fiction is ultimately about people and society, as our society experiences changes, so does the fiction we read, write, and publish.

Last month, at the annual World Science Fiction Convention, N.K. Jemisin won her third Hugo Award in a row for Best Novel. Jemisin is the first writer ever to win three back-to-back Hugos for Best Novel; she received them 2016-2018 for her Broken Earth trilogy: *The Fifth Season*, *The Obelisk Gate*, and (this year) *The Stone Sky*.

She is also the only African-American writer ever to win a Hugo for Best Novel during the entire 65 years of the award's existence.

Her Broken Earth trilogy, often described as “groundbreaking,” has been optioned for development by a TV production company, so it may soon reach a much wider audience. *The Guardian reports*, “But it is not stocked with fantasy figures for the adolescent male. The central emotional relationships are those between a mother and her daughters, and the deep structure of the plot explores the experience of slavery and the cost and necessity of revolt.”

This year was the first time Jemisin accepted her rocket in person. (The Hugo Award is rocket-shaped and fairly big; winners share anecdotes every year about getting their awards through airport security on the way home from WorldCon.) She joked in her acceptance speech that she had by now developed a superstition that she only won awards when she wasn't there to accept them.



*WorldCon Guest of Honor John Picacio presents the 2018 Hugo Award for Best Novel to N.K. Jemisin. (Courtesy of Mark Shallcross.)*

She then talked about some of the hard work and obstacles on her road to this moment: “I have kept writing even though my first novel, *The Killing Moon*, was initially rejected on the assumption that only black people would ever possibly want to read the work of a black writer.”

After eventually being published in 2012, *The Killing Moon* was nominated for a Nebula Award and a World Fantasy Award.

She also discussed the themes she explored in her three Hugo-winning novels, recounted some of her frustrating experiences in the sf/f genre, and concluded, “But this is the year in which I get to smile at all of those naysayers—every single mediocre insecure wannabe who fixes their mouth to suggest that I do not belong on this stage, that people like me cannot possibly have earned such an honor, that when *they* win it, it’s ‘meritocracy,’ but when *we* win it, it’s ‘identity politics.’ I get to smile at those people, and lift a massive, shining, rocket-shaped middle finger in their direction.”

It should be noted that the Hugo Awards are determined by popular vote; you have to register with WorldCon to cast a ballot, but anyone can do so. So Jemisin’s victory represents the will of the people, so to speak, rather than being determined by a panel of judges. Approbation for her victory (and her speech) has not been universal, but it has been widespread.

An additional sign of how much the times are changing is that the winners across almost all Hugo categories that night were women, and this is the third year in a row this has been the case. Prior to 2016, that never happened even once in the entire [history](#) of the Hugos, and there are many years in Hugo’s long past where women were very scarce or missing altogether.

So we women get to have adventures now! Ride hippos! Fight zombies! And dominate the Hugo Awards.

Unsurprisingly, as Jemisin predicted in her speech, there have been claims from certain quarters about “identity politics.” Not only in reaction to an African-American winning Best Novel three years in a row, but also in response to women dominating the Hugos for three whole years (after 60+ years of men dominating the award), as well as people and works representing diverse ethnicity and sexuality making prominent appearances on the Hugo ballot these days.

It might be comforting to dismiss cries of “identity politics” and “virtue signaling” (i.e. voting for “politically correct” choices rather than for good stories you enjoyed reading) as just the verbal drooling of a couple of random cranks, but that’s not realistic; such comments are also made by people with a megaphone and an audience, such as a fanzine editor, a small publisher, a published writer, or a blogger.

So there’s still a lot of sludge running under the long bridge that Jemisin crossed to become the first black writer to win a Hugo for Best Novel—let alone three in a row. It was a tough journey. She and many other writers have faced, still face, and will continue to face, such hurdles on their individual paths to publication, recognition, and rewards. And she and these writers are heroes & heroines for persisting in the face of misogyny, racism, bigotry, apathy, and publishing norms that too often follow far behind the times rather than leading with courage and vision.

It wasn’t that easy, when I was a girl passionate about heroism and adventure, to find my



fictional role models, and I still treasure the ones I found back then. I also remember my old college roommate, an African-American, telling me in the 1990s how hard it was to find children's books with African-American males as the protagonists, and how important it was to her young sons when she did find them.

There was never any point at which I—or she—said, “What we really need are *fewer* white male heroes.” What she said to me was that she wanted to see *more* African-American boys as the heroes in children's books. What I've said my whole life is that I want to see *more* women as adventure heroines.

The longing to see fictional characters you can identify with, or who serve as your role models, or who satisfy your desire for much-needed affirmation in this tough world is not a quest to exclude someone else. It's a longing for more choices, a greater range of visions, and more inclusion. And is that really so scary?

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Fantasy novelist [Laura Resnick](#) is the author of the *Esther Diamond series* and the *Silerian Trilogy*.

September 26 - September 30, 2018



Registration has closed. We'll see you on the beach in a few weeks!

For those who couldn't attend, look for conference reports in the upcoming newsletters.

For those attending, please join the conference e-loop [here](#).

**Conference FAQs:** <https://ninc.com/conferences/about-the-ninc-conference/ninc-conference-faq/>

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

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## Member discounts

[Covers Sell Books](#) is a new author-friendly app for creating book ads. They are providing a 20% discount to the first 50 NINC members who use the link and code, which can be found on the [Members Freebies and Discount page](#) on our website. In the future those members will be able to continue getting the same discount, as well.

Included on our page is the link for the no-cost alternative, to try out the program first.

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Open positions include:

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



*Founded in 1989*

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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.

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- Janice Young Brooks
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- Marianne Shock

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*Address changes may be made on the website.*

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