

# How to Grow Your Fiction Writing Skills

By Victory Crayne  
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I have been writing fiction since 1995 and in the beginning had almost no clue about how to become a better writer. As a result, I floundered and wasted many years. Here are some lessons I learned about improving writing skills. Perhaps this will help you save years of effort.

## A. Learn some writing basics

1. Take some creative writing classes.
  - a. Many community colleges and adult learning centers have short classes for beginners. Participation in a class will jump start your learning, provide some discipline in doing writing as homework, and allow you to compare your skills with other writers in a supportive environment.
  - b. Classes can help by forcing you to focus on lessons. Classes are also good because they enable you to afford some time in front of a mentor/teacher for some personal attention on your skills.
  - c. Look for classes taught by writers who have sold fiction. It is better to learn from those who have succeeded in the marketplace.
2. Read a few books on writing fiction.
  - a. Resist the temptation to buy every book in the store, thinking that you will read them all and THEN you will know everything. There are too many books and some are not good.
  - b. Get books on major writing skills, for example, creating memorable characters, hooks on opening, plotting, dialogue, characterization, emotion, external conflict (between people or people versus nature), internal conflict (inside the character), and others. Try a few books at first. Later, as you become more knowledgeable, you will be ready to digest more.
  - c. After you have written more and have learned more about writing skills, you will become a better judge of books on writing. Most writers end up with a bookshelf crammed full of books on writing, and have not read most of them.

- d. Here are some of my favorite books on writing fiction.
- 1) "How to Write a Damn Good Novel" by James N. Frey, copyright 1987. ISBN 0-312-01044-3. This is a compact book of 174 pages, but Frey packs a lot into every page, with examples.
  - 2) "How to Write a Damn Good Novel, II" by James N. Frey, copyright 1994. ISBN 0-312-10478-2. This is a sequel to his first book, on advanced techniques for dramatic storytelling.
  - 3) "Writing the Breakout Novel" by Donald Maass, copyright 2001. ISBN 0-89879-995-3 (hardcover), ISBN 1-58297-182-X (paperback). Maass has been a New York literary agent for 20 years. See [www.maassagency.com](http://www.maassagency.com).
  - 4) "Writing the Breakout Novel Workbook" by Donald Maass, copyright 2004. ISBN 1-58297-263-X (paperback). This workbook will walk you through many exercises that he uses in his workshops. His teaching schedule is posted on his website.
  - 5) "The Career Novelist" by Donald Maass, copyright 1996. ISBN 0-435-08693-6 (trade paperback). Maass wrote about the publishing industry and its many changes (up to the year it was published, of course). He also offers valuable advice to writers. Here is what Dean Koontz had to say about it: "Packed full of fine analysis, solid advice, and thoughtful reflection on the state of contemporary publishing. It's further distinguished by more common sense than any book of its type that I have ever read. A treasure."
  - 6) I have gained much from "Characters & Viewpoint" by Orson Scott Card, ISBN 0-89879-307-6.
  - 7) Another favorite is "The First Five Pages, A writer's Guide to Staying Out of the Rejection Pile" by Noah Lukeman, ISBN 0-684-85743-X.

3. Read some articles on the Web on writing fiction.

- a. Do a search for "Crawford Kilian". He wrote a series of articles of great use.
- b. Another is Holly Lisle at [www.hollylisle.com](http://www.hollylisle.com).

B. Write regularly.

1. You can't learn the skills by just reading books. You have to write. The more you write, the more you will learn. "If you want to be a writer--stop talking about it and sit down and write!" - Jackie Collins

2. Set aside regular time to write and don't allow anything else to steal that time. "You will never find time for anything. If you want time you must make it." - Charles Buxton
  3. Write a lot. And rewrite. You make your writing perfect by the rewriting process.
  4. "Being a writer is like having homework every night for the rest of your life." - Lawrence Kasdan
  5. "By making writing a part of your daily routine--just like brushing your teeth--you'll discipline yourself to work as a writer instead of a hobbyist who only writes when there's some fun to be had." - Theresa Grant
- C. Get feedback on your writing.
1. The most powerful lesson is learning how to get critiques of your writing. As the author, you are blind to your own writing weaknesses.
  2. Joining a critique group is very useful for this.
    - a. The experience will open your eyes to not only weaknesses in the writing of others, but more importantly, to weaknesses in your own writing. You will be better able to see what was invisible to you before. You will be motivated to make sure you don't have the same weaknesses in your next submission to that critique group, for fear of appearing foolish in front of them.
    - b. Internet online critique groups work just as well as in-person ones. You may want to try some of both, to find a group you like.
  3. Learn how to prepare critiques.
    - a. There are some good articles on the web, including "How to Critique Fiction" by Victory Crayne, available on [www.crayne.com](http://www.crayne.com).
    - b. There are books on critiquing, but beware of any called "literary critiquing". That kind of critiquing is often erudite and elitist and is not of much help to beginning writers.
- D. Start a list of your most common writing weaknesses.
1. Every fiction writer must constantly be on the lookout for weaknesses in his own writing. First drafts will contain many of them.
  2. For example, your own checklist may contain things like:
    - a. Write from the eyeballs of the POV (Point of View) character. Add more "feel of the place". Add visual and other sensory clues for readers so they can "see the movie" too.

- b. Remove scenes, paragraphs, and words that are not critical to the book's premise.
  - c. Show versus Tell: Look for places where you told the reader a character felt a certain emotion. If this is in narration, it may be okay to tell the emotion. But generally, try to dramatize the emotion where possible. "Don't tell the reader what to think." If the characters are actively doing something (moving, talking, etc.), then don't narrate their emotion. Dramatize instead by showing the emotion (via body language, speech expressions, and facial expressions).
  - d. Try to avoid using adverbs and adjectives. Instead of adding to the reader's enjoyment, adverbs and adjectives usually dilute the action and description. In addition, try to use more descriptive and specific verbs and nouns.
  - f. Run a spelling and grammar checker. Don't trust it completely, though; programmers of such software are not always good writers themselves. Use these checkers to find the silly mistakes you type in.
  - g. Read the submission aloud for a check on awkward wording, missing words, etc. Sometimes when you edit, you put in new mistakes.
- 3. Learn how to fix each of your writing weaknesses.
  - 4. Then don't let any submission go out for critique until you make sure ALL of those weaknesses have been fixed. Always send in your best work.
  - 5. One useful source is the "Turkey City Lexicon", which you can find on the Internet. This lists common writing errors that beginners often make. Don't be caught doing any of them.
  - 6. "I have never thought of myself as a good writer. Anyone who wants reassurance of that should read one of my first drafts. But I'm one of the world's great rewriters." - James A. Michener
  - 7. "If someone tells you politely that you have a persistent problem with one aspect of writing, treat it like they've told you have spinach on your teeth or your fly is open. Once it's happened in front of friends, don't allow it to happen in front of strangers." - Don Muchow
- E. Let your drafts sit for a while before you revise them.
- 1. Let them grow a little stale in your mind (for weeks or months) so you forget the train of thought you had while writing. Then you will be able to read them fresh like a new reader. You will be amazed how many weaknesses slipped in. "You can never correct your work well until you have forgotten it." - Voltaire

2. When you are done, go once more through your checklists, run the spell check, read it aloud, etc.
- F. Another powerful tool is to look to the future of your writing career to make a list of what writing skills you need to learn next. Remember: your progress will be stopped until you learn each lesson. Then seek out information on mastering those new skills.
- G. Read some books by your favorite authors with a critical eye.

Look for how they handle writing skills: characterization, emotion, dialogue, narrative description, character development, conflict (inner conflict in the protagonist and conflict between the characters), show versus tell, plot, etc. Everything you have learned about.

- H. You might try your hand at writing some short stories. The discipline of writing an entire story in few words will help make your novel writing more crisp and powerful.

- I. Settle in for a long learning period.

1. Writing novels is a whole new career. To become good at it, do your homework.
2. "However great a man's natural talent may be, the act of writing cannot be learned all at once." - Jean Jacques Rousseau
3. "Beginning writers must appreciate the prerequisites if they hope to become writers. You pay your dues - which takes years." - Alex Haley
4. Be prepared to write a million words before you even can think about being good. So said the late science fiction writer Mike McQuay. You can shorten than learning time by learning as fast as possible from critiques, books, classes, mentors, practice, etc.
5. "Practice listening (and using all of your senses) as if it were a form of meditation. Your job as a writer is to project your readers into the reality you create, so you must learn to be so aware of reality that you can create a detailed simulacrum of it." - Don Muchow

- J. Stay motivated.

1. The above suggestions seem like a lot of work. But you will find that time spent writing produces the "writer's high", an addictive experience.
2. "It is never too late to be what you might have been." - George Eliot
3. "When this question comes up... and it will... 'When are you going to get a real job?' Just say 'my job is not reaching my deathbed with regrets about dreams I was too scared to pursue. You should look into it.' That generally shuts people right up." - Stephen King

4. "The biggest mistake people make in life is not trying to make a living at doing what they most enjoy." - Malcolm S. Forbes
  
5. "As you're reading this, your life's getting shorter. It's ticking away. I'm not saying this to frighten you. Or even scare you. Though it may. I'm saying this to you to awaken you. To inspire you. To rise you out of your deep slumber. To really know you won't live forever. To share your unique gifts. To ignite your great inner fire. To ignite your great inner strength. To ignite your great inner light. To shine. Brightly shine. To ignite your great inner beauty. To motivate. Yourself and others. To love. Yourself and others. To paint. To write. To teach. To innovate. To sing. To dance. To care. To feel. To listen. To learn. To laugh. The clock's ticking. The world needs you. Make your move."  
- Mike Litman

I hope the above has been helpful.

- Victory Crayne

Web: [www.crayne.com](http://www.crayne.com)

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