

## LEGENDS OF THE PEN

By Blair Bancroft

*Authors, beware! There be Monster Myths here.*

“Everyone knows . . . !” “The rules say . . .” “My critique partner says . . .”

Tired of hearing those phrases? Well, so am I. Though please keep in mind that the following essay is my personal opinion, and I am definitely *not* saying, “My way or the highway.” There are as many ways to write as there are writers. This article is intended to make you think—to give you ammunition against rigid minds who not only have to have rules but want everyone to do exactly as they do. Take heart. A great deal of what “they” say could be called Legends of the Pen.

My comments are based on fifteen years as an author, fourteen contracted books, and judging more than 300 contests over the last seven years. I’ve also learned a great deal from my many years on RWA’s Clues-N-News, BeauMonde, and other author e-loops. To rephrase, do not believe every “rule” you hear. Think. Question. Reason.

And now . . . we’re off into the realm of offending almost everyone! But it will be worth it if I can assure some of you that there is more than one way to get that book down on paper.

**Backstory.** One of the biggest myths being propagated at the moment is No Backstory. Some contest entrants, sensing this doesn’t work, carefully put the backstory into the Synopsis, not stopping to think that a reader never sees the synopsis. No, you don’t want to start your book with a twelve pages of backstory, but clarity is absolutely vital. Who, What, Where, When, and Why. Readers do not want to be lost in a slew of unintentional mystery, with no idea who the characters are, their relationship to each other, their desires, motivations, etc. In contests I constantly see these concepts beautifully laid out in synopses, then not one word of it makes it into the manuscript. Some backstory is essential. Identify, clarify. (Contest judges should always read the synopsis last, approaching the manuscript cold, just as a reader would.)

**Show, Don't Tell.** A concept most authors have mastered quite well. But in several contests I judged recently, the authors seemed to have been advised to tackle this problem by writing page after page of dialogue—pages without descriptions, introspection, or action. The entries read like play or film scripts. Yet in those media there are visuals to guide you on stage or screen. In books, there's nothing but the picture painted by the author's words. Solid dialogue can be as deadly as solid narration unless you add all those colorful extras. How do the characters look while speaking? How do they sound? Where are they? Do they wave their arms, stalk across the room, sit slumped on a couch? Best of all, what is the primary character *thinking*?

The best definition I know of "Show, Don't Tell" is that you, the author, must take the reader inside the head of the primary character in the scene. Make the reader see what the hero or heroine sees, hear what they hear, feel what they feel. Do not sit on the outside like a storyteller by a dying campfire chanting about a boring ancient event.

**Editing.** "Keep writing, no matter what!" All right, there may be some people who have to follow that advice or they'd never finish, but I believe most published authors would agree that Editing is vital. And editing as you go works best for most of us. For example, I often end up with little more than bare bones on my first draft of a chapter. It's only when I go back and edit that I add all the juicy bits of description and color. If I didn't edit at the end of every chapter, I wouldn't have what I need to build on for the next chapter. I'd be trying to add skin to a skeleton without muscles! Everyone must develop their own editing methods, but editing—adding, deleting, tightening—is absolutely essential. I edit at the end of every chapter, again at the end of every five chapters. Then straight through from the beginning, checking continuity, clarity, descriptions, color, etc.. And then I go back and do it again.

**Multiple Point of View.** There is no question that the best advice for beginners is to stick to the point of view of Hero, Heroine, and possibly a Villain. Especially if you're aiming at Category. But, if you're writing Single Title and can handle the switches, multiple POV is frequently used. The secret is in making sure you understand

what Point of View is - that if you are telling the story from one person's POV, you need to stick to that POV, usually for an entire scene. Switching within a scene is usually a trick best left to experienced authors. But don't let anyone tell you you can't use multiple POV. However, "head-hopping"—constantly jumping from one POV to another in the space of one scene—is a definite No-no.

**Synopsis - Planning.** This one has a lot of myths attached. For example: You have to do a storyboard. You have to interview your characters. You have to write a detailed twenty- to thirty-page outline. Truthfully, all you have to do is whatever works for you. For me, it's naming my characters, at least the hero, heroine, and secondary characters at the beginning of the book. As I name them and list their relationships, they begin to take shape for me. But everyone has his/her own method. If storyboards, detailed outlines, brainstorming techniques from a "how to" book or whatever, work for you, then by all means don't hesitate to use them. Just know there are no absolutes. What works for one person may be a roadblock to someone else.

**Synopsis - Writing.** Unless you know the editor you're targeting requires a long synopsis, 3-5 pages, double-spaced, is generally recommended. You can use a Log Line at the beginning, if you wish. This is two or three lines giving the gist of your book in a nutshell (like a TV guide). Beneath that you can put brief character sketches of the Hero, Heroine, and possibly the Villain. (I try to keep all this short enough to fit on page 1 of the synopsis.) Then, in present tense, you tell the story from beginning to end. You do not add backstory or characterizations that are not in the manuscript. You, as an author, do not comment about the manuscript. You do not say Word One that is not on the pages of the manuscript itself!\* Keep your overview of the story line for your query letter. Do, however, try to keep some of your Voice in the telling of your story. Never easy, but your Synopsis should sound like *you*, not a neutral Readers' Digest version told by a stranger.

\**Note:* I feel strongly about this because, as a contest judge, I have read so many manuscripts where everything was laid out beautifully in the Synopsis and then

the author jumped into the manuscript, assuming the reader knew everything that was in the Synopsis. Please remember: the reader never sees the Synopsis. Everything you want the reader to know must in the pages of the manuscript itself.

**Format.** Manuscripts should be submitted in classic manuscript format. (Never attempt to imitate book format!) Just because typewriters back at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. could only type Courier is no reason why any of us should still be confined to this ugly, anachronistic type font. That said, it is necessary to understand there is a reason for typing manuscripts in Courier. The publishing world determined word count back in the days when Courier was all there was. Therefore if you want to know how long your book is by NY standards, you have to know how long it is in Courier 12. If you can figure this out (see my article on Word Count), <http://www.blairbancroft.com/> then you can submit in any clear type font.

**Wandering Body Parts.** I believe we all have better things to do than worry about Wandering Body Parts. We're writing fiction in the vernacular. We "talk" Wandering Body Parts, so why not write them? (I say, as my fingers fly over the keyboard.)

**Writing - Craft or Art?** Okay, some aspects of writing can be taught, but my personal feeling is that you learn a great deal more from reading the best authors in your particular sub-genre. Be wary of swallowing whole everything you read in "How to" Books. Keep in mind they are frequently written by people who came to these conclusions while trying to figure out why they were unable to write a saleable work of fiction. How-to books written by successful authors, editors, or agents are your best bet for helpful information, although I'm still inclined to see writing more as an art than a craft. Basically, take what is useful to you from these books and don't sweat the so-called "rules" that don't work for you.

**Strong Writing.** This entire article was prompted by a "craft" discussion on one of my author e-mail loops, a discussion that inspired me to sit down late one night, and

write the paragraphs that appear below. Fortunately, I didn't let them disappear into cyberspace with other old e-mails. What I wrote that night off the top of my head emphasizes my belief that good writing is more Art than Craft. That writing comes from the Soul, not from following the so-called rules in a book. Never be afraid to be yourself.

**Strong Writing - No Myth.** Although an editor undoubtedly grimaces over bad spelling and grammar, I can almost guarantee she/he is not counting the number of times an author uses "was" or "-ly." An editor is looking for a story that captures her interest. Every time she chooses a book she lays her job on the line. ("Is this book strong enough to sell enough copies to justify my job?") So if she is gracious enough to tell an author that her writing is "strong," that's a true compliment and encouragement, not a reference to nitpicking rules out of "how to" manual.

Strong writing is telling a good story. Strong writing is creating great characters. Strong writing is letting those characters speak naturally, without their words being stilted or superfluous. Strong writing is painting vivid word pictures, whether it's a crowd scene, a sunset, or an intimate moment. Strong writing invokes emotions, makes the reader care about the characters. To repeat Number One: **Strong writing is a tale well told.**