
Opening Extract from...

How Not to Write a Novel

Written by
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Published by Penguin Books Ltd

HOW *NOT* to WRITE a NOVEL

200 Mistakes To Avoid At All Costs If
You Ever Want To Get Published

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and SANDRA NEWMAN

PENGUIN BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

Unpublished authors often cite the case of John Kennedy Toole, who, unable to find a publisher for his novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, took his own life. Thereafter, his mother relentlessly championed the book, which was eventually published to great acclaim and earned him a posthumous Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

Yes, we say, that is a strategy, but it is a strategy that demands a remarkable level of commitment from the author's mother, and an even greater commitment from the author. And, of course, it puts a serious crimp in the book tour. But even more to the point, it will work only if you have in fact written a masterpiece that awaits only the further enlightenment of the publishing industry and the reading public to receive the treatment it deserves.

If this is the case, we are no good to you. If there is, however, any chance that your writing could stand some improvement, we can help.

Unpublished novelists can, of course, turn to the innumerable books on writing already available: magisterial tomes from great authors; arc-schemes and plot-generating formulas from less-great authors; inspirational books about releasing the inner artist or freeing the creative mind.

We do not discourage you from reading any of them. The best are themselves good writing, and the more good writing you read, the better a writer you might become. Inspirational books might indeed inspire you, or at least serve as Dumbo's magic

feather. Even plot wheels are good for a laugh, and you can always while away a merry hour putting together new characters from the Big Box o' Traits like a Mr. Potato Head, and then return to writing your novel refreshed and renewed.

But if reading Stephen King on writing really did the trick, we would all by now be writing engrossing vernacular novels that got on the bestseller lists; and it has been demonstrated through years of workshops that the Artist Within tends to make the same mistakes as the artist within everybody else. Furthermore, in trying to write novels to the specifications of a manual, the writer will often feel that her voice and imagination are being stifled, and nobody can fail to notice that for every "rule" of writing these books present, novels can be found in which it has been broken with great success.

Therefore we saw a need, a service we could provide.

All these many writing books strive to offer distinct, sometimes radically different approaches to writing a novel. But if you locked all their authors in a room and slowly started filling it with water, and the only way they could escape was to reach some consensus on writing, their only hope for survival would be to agree on the things you *shouldn't* do—which is to say, the contents of *How Not to Write a Novel*.

We do not presume to tell you how or what to write. We are merely telling you the things that editors are too busy rejecting your novel to tell you themselves, pointing out the mistakes they recognize instantly because they see them again and again in novels they do not buy.

We do not propose any rules; we offer observations. "No right on red" is a rule. "Driving at high speed toward a brick wall usually ends badly" is an observation.

Hundreds of unpublished and unpublishable novels have passed across our desks, so we have been standing here by the side of the road for a very long time. Had you been standing here with us,

you would have seen the same preventable tragedies occurring over and over, and you would have made the same observations.

Do not think of us as traffic cops, or even driving instructors. Think of us instead as your onboard navigation system, available day or night, a friendly voice to turn to whenever you look up, lost and afraid, and think "How the fuck did I end up here?"

PART I

PLOT

Not just a bunch of stuff that happens

As a writer you have only one job: to make the reader turn the page. Of all the tools a writer uses to make a reader turn the page, the most essential is the plot. It doesn't matter if the plot is emotional ("Will Jack's fear of commitment prevent him from finding true love with Synthya?"), intellectual ("But Jack, Synthya's corpse was found in a locked room, with nothing but a puddle on the floor next to her and a recently thawed leg of mutton on the end table!"), or physical ("Will Jack's unconstitutional torture of Synthya Abu Dhabi, the international terrorist, lead to the location of the ticking bomb?") as long as it compels the reader to find out what happens next. If your reader doesn't care what happens next—it doesn't.

Typically, the plot of a *good* novel begins by introducing a sympathetic character who wrestles with a thorny problem. As the plot thickens, the character strains every resource to solve the problem, while shocking developments and startling new information help or hinder her on the way. Painful inner conflicts drive her onward but sometimes also paralyze her at a moment of

truth. She finally overcomes the problem in a way that takes the reader totally by surprise, but in retrospect seems both elegant and inevitable.

The plot of a typical *unpublished* novel introduces a protagonist, then introduces her mother, father, three brothers, and her cat, giving each a long scene in which they exhibit their typical behaviors one after another. This is followed by scenes in which they interact with each other in different combinations, meanwhile driving restlessly to restaurants, bars, and each other's homes, all of which is described in detail.

A typical plot event in an unpublished novel is when the protagonist gets a disastrous haircut, at a moment when her self-esteem is hanging *by threads*. This sets the character up for the ensuing "Mother thinks protagonist spends too much on haircuts, but is made to see that self-esteem is crucial to mental health" scene, the "boyfriend doesn't understand character's needs, but finally acknowledges the gendered basis of his priorities," scene, and the "taking a bubble bath to relax after stress-filled scenes" scene, in which the protagonist mentally recapitulates the previous three scenes. Cue waking up the next morning on page 120, with anything resembling a story yet to appear on the horizon.

Sometimes a contemplative prologue will depict the protagonist looking out the window and thinking of all the philosophical conundrums the author will not have time to present in the ensuing narrative. Sometimes the prologue simply presents those philosophical conundrums in a voice that issues from nowhere. Sometimes the prologue dispenses with philosophy completely and presents a protagonist looking out the window thinking about hair products.

A great many plot problems that show up in unpublished manuscripts can be resolved with a single strategy. *Know* what the chase is, and cut to it. Do not write hundreds of pages without knowing what story you really want to tell. Do not write hun-

dreds of pages explaining why you want to tell the story you are about to tell, why the characters are living the way they are when the story begins, or what past events made the characters into people who would have that story. Write hundreds of pages *of* the story, or else you'll find that what you write will not be shelved in the libraries of the future but will instead form the landfill upon which those libraries are built. In fact, employing any of the plot mistakes that follow will guarantee that your novel will be only a brief detour in a ream of paper's journey to mulch.

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BEGINNINGS AND SETUPS

A manuscript comes screaming across the sky . . .

Many writers kill their plots in their infancy with an ill-conceived premise or an unreadable opening. Try any of the strategies we've collected in our extensive field work, and you too can cut off narrative momentum at the ankles.

The Lost Sock

Where the plot is too slight

"Fools," Thomas Abrams thought, shaking his head as he completed his inspection of the drainage assembly under the worried eyes of Len Stewart. "Foolish, foolish, fools," he muttered. Squirming out from under the catchment basin, he stood up and brushed off the grit that clung to his gray overalls. Then he picked up his clipboard and made a few notes on the form, while Len waited anxiously for the verdict. Thomas didn't mind making him wait.

"Well," he said, as he finished and put the pen away. "Well, well, well."

"What is it?" Len asked, unable to keep a tremor out of his voice.

"When will you people learn that you can't use a B-142 joint-enclosure with a 1811-D nipple cinch?"

"B-but—" Len stammered.

"Or maybe, let me take a wild guess here, just maybe, you confused an 1811-D with an 1811-E?" He paused to let it sink in before delivering the death-blow. " . . . *Again*."

He left Len speechless and walked away without a look back, chuckling ruefully as he imagined the look on Len's face when he fully realized the implications of his mistake.

Here the main conflict is barely adequate to sustain a *Partridge Family* episode. Remember that this drama has to carry the reader through 300-odd pages. The central dilemma of a novel should be important enough to change someone's life forever.

Furthermore, it should be something of *broad* interest. One of the first stumbling blocks a novelist must overcome is the misapprehension that what is of interest to him will necessarily be of interest to anybody else. A novel is *never* an opportunity to vent about the things that your roommates, friends, or mother cannot bear to listen to one more time. No matter how passionate and just your desire to see the masculine charms of the short man appreciated by the fair sex, or to excoriate landlords who refuse to make plumbing repairs, even when in violation of the specific wording of the lease, which wording he might pretend to be unaware of, but you know better because you have made highlighted copies for him as well as for your roommates, friends, and mother—these are not plots but gripes.

This is not to say that a short man, unlucky in love and living in a house with substandard plumbing, cannot be your hero, but his height and plumbing should be background and texture, sketched in briefly as he heads to the scene of the crime, wondering how the hell anyone could get injuries like that from a leg of mutton.

The Waiting Room

In which the story is too long delayed

Reggie boarded the train at Montauk and found a seat near the dining car. As he sat there, smelling the appalling cheeseburgers from the adjoining carriage, he started thinking about how he had decided to become a doctor. Even as a boy, he had been interested in grotesque diseases. But did that mean he had a vocation? The train jolted, keeping him from falling asleep, and the smell of those cheeseburgers was making him nauseous. It was the same way the sight of blood still made him feel, he realized. Why had he made that decision, so many years ago?

Montauk rushed backward in the windows . . .

(10 pages later:)

The last houses of Montauk were tiny among the sandy grass. They seemed to shine against the backdrop of Reggie's continuing gloom as he considered further the reasons for his current predicament. If only he had done the biology PhD he'd originally wanted, instead of taking the advice of Uncle Frank. Uncle Frank had said to him on that occasion, scratching his hairy neck as was his habit, "Now, Reggie, don't make the mistakes I made

> when I took that biology PhD in '56 and gave up my chances at . . ."

(10 pages later:)

> . . . and to make a long story short, that's how I met your Aunt Katharine. And that's how you got here," Uncle Frank concluded. Reggie would have been nonplussed, he had reflected at the time, had he not learned of his mother's illicit affair with Uncle Frank from Cousin Stu months earlier, when Stu had called to tell him about his golf scholarship to Penn, a scholarship which had only rekindled Reggie's bitterness about his mistaken decision to take premed . . .

Here the writer churns out endless scenes establishing background information with no main story in sight. On page 50, the reader still has no idea why it's important to know about Reggie's true parentage, his medical career, or the geography of Montauk. By page 100, the reader would be having strong suspicions that it *isn't* important, were a reader ever to make it as far as page 100.

The writer has also created an entire frame scene in which nothing actually happens. Don't forget that from the reader's perspective, the main story line is what is happening to the protagonist *now*. So whatever Reggie thinks about on the train, the main action is a man sitting and staring out of a window, feeling a little queasy, page after page after page.

Avoid creating scenes merely as places where a character remembers or mulls over background information. The character will have plenty of time to do that in scenes where something actually happens. It would be much more effective, for instance, if Reggie had reservations about his profession in the course of

a scene in which he is performing a life-saving operation on his kid brother.

If you find yourself unable to escape a Waiting Room, look honestly at your novel and consider what the first important event is. Everything before that event can probably be cut. If there is important information in that material, how briefly can it be explained? Surprisingly often, twenty pages of text can be replaced by a single paragraph of exposition or interior monologue. If you feel even more drastic measures are called for, see "Radical Surgery for Your Novel," page 11.

The Long Runway

In which a character's childhood is recounted to no purpose

- 1 -

Reynaldo's first memory was of his mother, the Contessa, dressing for an evening of card playing. That night, the scandalous Marquis vin Diesel came to pick her up in his elegant horse-drawn Louis Quinze brolly. The sight of the matched Angora geldings in the gathering dusk, harnessed in ampersands and cornices after the fashion of the day, would forever be burned into Reynaldo's memory.

"Good night, sweet Prince," his mother called from the door. "Do sleep thou tightly."

"I entreat thee and simper, mother, stay!" baby Reynaldo said, gesturing at the fearful dark behind the damasked street lamps. "Doth there be not danger?"

"Oh, that is a silly Leviathan of thy youthful imaginings," his mother scoffed uproariously, and pulled the

door to. She returned later that night unharmed, and gave him a caramel merkin she'd won in a final tempestuous hand of *vingt-fromage*.

- 2 -

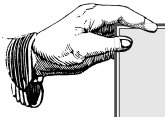
Thirty-five years later, Reynaldo tumbled out of bed, laughing heartily at his manservant Hugo, and went about his morning toilette.

Soon, glistening with ambergris and jauntily sprinkling himself with exotic tars and raisins, Reynaldo called out, "No need to tune the pangolin this morning, Hugo, for I have decided to cancel my lesson and rendezvous with the Infanta for shuttlecocks."

For mysterious reasons, many authors consider it useful to provide a story about a forty-year-old man-about-town with a prologue drawn from his life as a five-year-old boy. It is equally common for such authors, in the cause of thoroughness, to go on to provide scenes of the hero at ten, fifteen, and twenty-five before arriving at the age where he will actually do something. Presumably this is meant to yield insights into the hero's character and the key events that formed it, which is a good idea when presenting a paper at a symposium of psychoanalysts. Your reader, however, was hoping for a good yarn. (There's only one letter's difference between "yarn" and "yawn," and it is often a long letter, filled with childhood memories.)

While it is your job to know a great deal about your characters, it is seldom necessary to share it all with the reader, and by "seldom," we mean "never." You, an author, are providing a service to the reader: the service of telling a story. When you call somebody to provide you with a service, the IT guy for example,

do you want to hear everything he knows about C++ machine language, SSID encoding, and public key encryption before he tells you how to get back on line?



Radical Surgery for Your Novel
In media res

If your novel is getting bogged down in introductory background information, consider this time-tested kick-start technique.

Pick a pivotal action scene and start your novel in the middle of it, introducing your character when he is already in the midst of some gripping conflict, to get the reader instantly involved. This may be the first exciting event in the novel, but writers sometimes begin with the final climactic confrontation and then use most of the remaining book to bring the reader full circle, back to the big shoot-out, mass suicide, or spaying incident. Once the story has some momentum, you can pause the action to bring the reader up to date with any background information that's necessary.

"Action scene" doesn't mean this technique is limited to novels in which things blow up. "There I was, dressed in nothing but a towel in the most expensive suite in the Plaza Hotel, the man who thought he was marrying a seasonings heiress expected any minute. But that wasn't who I found when I answered the door . . . " works just as well as "There I was, dressed in nothing but a towel in the most expensive suite in the Plaza Hotel, the gunfire from the hallway getting closer and closer . . . "

The Vacation Slide Show

Where the author substitutes location for story

Rah T'uay was much dustier than Bangalot, Chip observed, refastening his backpack. Still he did not know if he would find here the deeper meaning to life that he had come to the East seeking weeks before. Could it be three weeks already? He counted in his head as he sipped the bitter local tea made of tea leaves and piping hot water. One, two, three weeks! It was three!

The first week he had spent among the lush vegetation of Bangalot, where the exotic tendrils of the carnivorous plants were only made more romantic by his chance encounter with Heather, on Spring Break from the U. of M. After their night of romance, it was on by boat to the mountain village of Ruh Ning Tsor, and at last an overnight connection on a bus which always seemed to be on the point of vanishing in the majesty and mysteriousness of the landscape it passed through on the way to the chalky cliffs of the coastal atoll of Suppu Rashon. How he had been forever changed in such a short time!

There was a time when a book could be sold purely because its author had been to distant climes and had returned to tell of the exotic sights he had seen. That author was Marco Polo, and the time was the thirteenth century. If you have particular knowledge of an interesting place, you should certainly use it to give your novel a strong sense of place and its own distinct flavor. But while exotic locales might add a savory tang to your novel, no matter what bazaars you have visited, fascinating con artists you have shared your money with, or ragged street children you have

pitied, the criteria for a story in Timbuktu are exactly the same as the criteria in Terre Haute. If Chip does nothing on a tropical island but describe the wonders of being on a tropical island, it is just a Waiting Room with foliage—foliage which, furthermore, the reader has already seen on the Discovery Channel, in HD.

Words Fail Me

Where the author stops short of communication

> Now that he had finally reached Paris, Chip understood why they called it the City of Lights. It was the lights! There was something special about Paris that was indescribable. It was so different than being back home in Terre Haute. There was something he couldn't put his finger on, a certain . . . *je ne sais quoi!* He finally understood what they meant by that!
>
> He bit into his Big Mac and, just as he'd always known it would, even a Big Mac tasted different here—the difference was unbelievable! It was something he had entirely missed out on all his life . . . until now. It was awesome.
>
> Ah, Paris! City of Lights!

A subcategory of the Vacation Slide Show consists of those novels in which the value of the exotic location exists only in the author's remembered experience of it, which experience burns so brightly in the author's mind that he does not realize he has failed to convey in any concrete way the physical, or even emotional, reality of the location to the reader. Unlike the Vacation Slide Show, there was *never* a time when this kind of novel could be sold, because it does not even let the reader see the sights. It

is the equivalent of showing slides of your visit to Machu Picchu, in which you stand in the foreground of each shot, smiling and gesturing at Machu Picchu but also blocking Machu Picchu from view. Your reader is not sharing your experience. Your reader is thinking, "What the hell is that behind him? It looks like it might be Machu Picchu. Or maybe a McDonald's."

This technique is not limited to descriptions of exotic places; words like "amazing" and "unbelievable" can be used to obscure any experience, event, or setting (see Part III, "Style—The Basics," for further discussion).

The Gum on the Mantelpiece

In which the reader is unintentionally misled

Irina entered the nursery to ensure a fire would be roaring when her two beloved sisters arrived. Before bending to stir the coals, she plucked from her mouth the moist pink wad of gum she had been chewing since coming to Petersburg from the family's country estate. The mantelpiece was bare, and Irina planted the large, wet bolus of gum firmly upon it.

At that precise instant, Uncle Vanya, passing through the conservatory, paused at the piano to play one eerie, dissonant chord, which seemed to hang suspended in the air, presaging misfortunes to come.

"Irina!" Masha said with delight, entering the nursery. Her cheeks were pink from the wintry winds, and cold still rose up off her thick and luxurious furs. Of the three, Masha had always been the most fashionable, and treasured her furs more than anything, except perhaps

for her beloved sisters. Masha threw her arms wide and crossed the room to embrace dear Irina, the sleeve of her most beloved sable coming very very close to the sticky lump of gum, kept soft and warm and really sticky by the flames that now leapt below it as it lurked there on the mantelpiece, nearly itself a glowering presence in the room, hungry and malevolent, like a sea anemone waiting for prey to swim by. It seemed only through some divine intervention that the sleeve was unharmed.

"Irina! Masha!" cried Natasha, as she entered the room to see them warmly embracing. Natasha was the prettiest, and the most vain, and her sisters had lovingly teased her since they were little about her long blonde hair, which she wore always loose, though it wasn't the custom.

Just as Natasha ran to her sisters, an ominous wind blew through an open window and lifted up her long, beautiful hair to swirl about her shoulders, floating like a defenseless blonde cloud, innocent and unaware of any danger, only *millimetres*—counted in the French style—from the gum on the mantelpiece.

"Come, let us go to another room and slowly reveal to each other our unhappinesses!" Natasha said.

"Yes! Let's do!" said Masha, and the three departed.

* * *

Later that day, Uncle Vanya came in from the cherry orchard and cleaned up the gum.

The good news is that as a writer of fiction you get to create your world from scratch. The bad news is that because you create your world from scratch, everything in it is a conscious

choice, and the reader will assume that there is some reason behind these choices. Sloppiness in these matters can lead to any number of unintended consequences, foremost among them what is known by writers as the Gum on the Mantelpiece. This is an element introduced in the beginning of a novel that seems so significant that the reader can't help but keep one eye on it, wondering when it will come into play. If it does not, your reader will feel unfairly dealt with. Remember: *if there is gum on the mantelpiece in the first chapter, it must go on something by the last chapter.*

For similar reasons, details that would go unremarked in real life—a quick glance across the room, the lyrics of the song that's playing when you enter a bar— take on much greater significance in fiction. If *you* have to run dripping from the shower to sign for an unexpected package, it is probably the gardening clogs you forgot you ordered from Lands' End. But if your character is interrupted in the shower by the arrival of an unexpected package, it tells your readers that the package will unleash a momentous chain of events.

Two particularly common versions follow.

Oh, Don't Mind Him

Where a character's problems remain unexplored

The river had never looked so beautiful and wild as it did that Friday morning in April. Fed by the melting snows of the mountains that towered grandly to our west, the icy clear waters rushed by around our waders, my brother's and mine, as we watched the rainbow flash of the trout in a companionable silence.

My brother, just back from the War, seemed restless, and though I was only a boy of eighteen, I recognized the smell of rum that hung about him like the clouds of midges that would descend on us those afternoons. And I saw my brother's anger flare when our somber meditations were broken by the loud, coarse laughter of two sportsmen up from Michigan, making their clumsy way through our woods. He seemed to feel my concern, and smiled through the sweat that glistered over his reddened face.

"War can do things to a man, Chip," he confessed, and then for the first time openly took out his flask. "When the black hound gets down into your soul, it will set its teeth into all your youthful dreamings."

I wanted to quiz him about this black hound, but forgot to ask and never had reason to think of it again, for the next day, uncomfortably dressed in my grandfather's suit, I was seated in a Pullman car of the Union Pacific, off to begin my great adventure at Yale.

In real life, people are riddled with chronic problems that are not addressed for long periods of time, if ever. But in fiction, all problems are just the opening chords of a song. If there is a brother who has a problem with alcohol, a child who has lost her dog, or even someone whose car has simply broken down, the reader will worry about those people and expect the author to do something about it. All such problems need their own little plot arc to give the reader closure. But subplots can easily start to spread and take over your novel. Often you would do better to focus your reader's empathy on the problems of your main character.

The Deafening Hug

The unintended love interest

Anna put her arms around her brother and held him close. He could smell her faint perfume, and the warmth of her body made all his troubles drain away. She had filled out since going away to college, and the gentle, persistent, pressure of her breasts was distinct through her thin T-shirt. He let her go at last and said, with a slight blush, "Why can't I talk to Amanda the way I talk to you?"

Anna laughed, but couldn't meet his eyes. "I don't know. Maybe 'cause she's beautiful?"

Hal choked on his response. To him, no one could ever be as beautiful as his little sister. If only she could see herself as others saw her! But he drove these ideas from his head. He had to concentrate on his troubles with Amanda, even if he was beginning to suspect he would have to look elsewhere for the real passion he was determined to find.

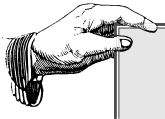
Sometimes the author is the last to know. It is all too easy to create a love interest where none is wanted. We call this the Deafening Hug for obvious reasons, and for reasons just as obvious, it should be avoided. Versions include:

- ***The Mayfly Fatale.*** A new character is described as "a handsome, muscular man with raven hair and a cheeky grin" or "a lissome blonde bombshell in a tight tank top." The reader immediately thinks this is a love/sex interest. While real life is full of attractive people who—let's face it—never look at you twice,

protagonists live in a charmed world where it is assumed that all the attractive people they notice are already halfway to the boudoir.

- ***Alice in Lapland.*** Any undue interest in or physical contact with children will set off alarms. If you do not want your reader to think he is reading about a pedophile, dandling of children on knees should be kept to a minimum by fathers, and even more so by uncles. If your character is in any way associated with organized religion, whether he is a bishop, a minister, or the kindly old church caretaker with a twinkle in his eye, he should not even pull a child from a burning building.

- ***We're Going to Need a Bigger Closet.*** Male friends hug, toast their friendship, and later stumble drunkenly to sleep in the cabin's one bed. The reader is way ahead of you—they are secretly gay, and nothing you say later is going to change his mind. If you do not intend them to be secretly gay, let Alan sleep on the couch.



The Red Herring on the Mantelpiece

A red herring is a well-planted false clue, sleight of hand that makes the reader watch one thing while you are busy doing another thing, a thing that will surprise and delight the reader when it is revealed at a time of your choosing.

The *inadvertently* misleading element, "The Gum on

the Mantelpiece," can sometimes be turned into a red herring and made to work for you instead of against you. If your novel is feeling a bit thin because too little is going on (see "Monogamy," page 21), the addition of a decent red herring can lend it some substance and depth. By tying things together and creating a greater sense of interrelatedness, you can convert mantelpiece gum into incarnadine fish.

A classic red herring is the obvious suspect in a whodunit (the smirking gigolo with a hair-trigger temper, the perverse countess) who looks increasingly suspect—until the last scene, when the culprit turns out to be someone else entirely. An equally time-honored herring is the shallow Lothario the heroine is in love with for 200 pages, or so she thinks.

Always make sure your red herring is an integral part of the story. When you perform sleight of hand, every movement should seem natural. So the murder suspect should be a character who is an established part of the world of the novel—typically it's the lover, close relative, or longtime colleague of the detective or the cadaver. We will not feel the same pleasure in being misled if the suspect is just an unlucky stranger who trips over the still-warm corpse in the dark and, in falling, catches hold of the murder weapon, leaving a perfect set of fingerprints.

And when your red herring no longer serves a purpose, do not simply drop it, leaving a frustratingly loose thread. When the lover is rejected, we want to see his reaction. The heroine will also be thinking about his feelings, and a failure to address these points will erode the reader's sense that the character is real.