



September 2011

Joining a writing group

You've been writing and rewriting. Sometimes it can feel like you're writing in circles and you can't help but wonder: Is it any good?

Writing groups and workshops can be a very valuable way to get feedback on your writing. They can also provide inspiration, ideas, and can inject your practice with new energy.

Some post-secondary institutions run more formal workshops where you can have your work evaluated by a professional writer.

Alternatively, if you're looking for something less structured, many writing groups meet in coffee shops or in members' homes on a regular basis. There are also many groups that operate solely online and will discuss members' writing either through email or on forums.

Writing groups and workshops can add immeasurable value to your work. Type "writing groups" and your city into a search engine and you will be well on your way.

Writing mysteries

This is a part of a series on writing genre fiction.

Genre fiction is popular with all kinds of readers, with some series capturing a loyal following year after year. Crime fiction, in particular, lends itself to the kind of books where the scene can change, and characters age and develop, but it is the plot that carries the most weight.

Just because a book falls into a genre or category of fiction, this doesn't mean that the usual rules governing good writing don't apply: indeed, the best crime writers are skilled writers, period. But beginning writers can practice their craft, especially plotting, on these kinds of stories. Here are some tips:

1. **Plot, plot, plot:** Readers enjoy a good puzzle, and they want to be given a fair chance to solve the mystery before the end of the book. So be very careful not to leave any

gaping holes in the plot. Red herrings are good, but it's cheating to introduce a mysterious poison unknown to modern science (particularly if your protagonist is using modern science to solve crime) or bring back a jealous ex-wife from the dead at the last minute unless you've given a hint somewhere along the way!

2. **Characters:** Not every character in a mystery novel has to be fully developed. Some minor characters can appear simply to move the plot along somehow and need not be seen again. But main characters must be as believable and complex as any in literature. If you are writing a series, beware of using the same phrases book after book to describe your hero. Part of the fun of building a fictional world over a series of books is allowing the characters lives to develop and change. Just be sure to explain why they do something that is grossly "out of character" to move the story along.
3. **Make a good beginning:** Mystery readers don't want to wait half the book for the crime to take place. There should be at least one serious crime, probably a murder, within the first three chapters. And the detective or main character and the villain should appear early on as well. A word about bad guys and girls: readers prefer it if they are not entirely evil. A moral dilemma or a bit of ambiguity about motives makes for a better and tenser plot.
4. **The crime must fit the book:** This brings us back again to plot. Is the murder believable? Could it happen that way? Would that kind of person commit that kind of crime? Part of establishing this will lie in your skill as a storyteller, but don't give yourself huge obstacles to overcome right away by requiring a feeble old lady, for example, to overpower a physically fit victim by brute force.
5. **The solution must fit the crime:** As the British Detection Club specified in its rules for writing crime novels, no relying on "Divine Intervention, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence, or Act of God." Furthermore, the reader must have all the information the detective has, either specifically or by inference so strong that only a total fool who is not paying attention can miss it.

Finally, for ways to break all of these rules, see the work of Agatha Christie, arguably one of the greatest crime writers who ever published.

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520 Princess Avenue. London, Ontario, N6B 2B8

Our telephone:
1-877-288-0114

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