

FLOGGING THE QUILL

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Mastering  
the Craft  
of Compelling  
Storytelling

Ray Rhamey

## **PRAISE FOR MASTERING THE CRAFT OF COMPELLING STORYTELLING**

From Tess Gerritsen, bestselling author of *Die Again*:

“Whether you’re writing your first novel or your twentieth, this book is a must-have for any novelist. And it’s one of the most readable, entertaining books on writing out there.”

Laura Abbott, co-owner & managing editor, Amber Quill Press:

“I’ve read many manuscript submissions that were near-misses. If those writers had had the benefit of this book, they’d be published right now. This is a must-read for the burgeoning storyteller and serious novelist, and it’s a necessity for editors who seek to nurture their writing clients.”

Dan Conaway, literary agent, Writer’s House:

“Learn the critical art of ruthless and rigorous self-editing from a man who understands the art better than most. His practical, sensible advice really can help you become a better writer.”

Lou Aronica, editor, publisher, president of The Fiction Studio:

“Writers will learn a great deal from the pages of this book. Rhamey offers the kind of advice that could make a huge difference in a writer’s prospects.”



# **Mastering the Craft of Compelling Storytelling**

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**Ray Rhamey**



Ashland, Oregon

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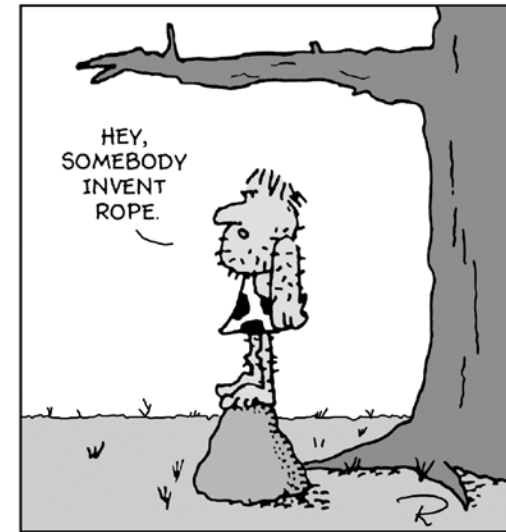
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**Disclosure:** much of the content of this book initially appeared as *Flogging the Quill*, *Crafting a Novel that Sells*, 2009, by this author. The original content has been expanded to deliver even more help for writers.

B.C. WRITER

BY RAY RHAMEY



As if rejection weren't enough.

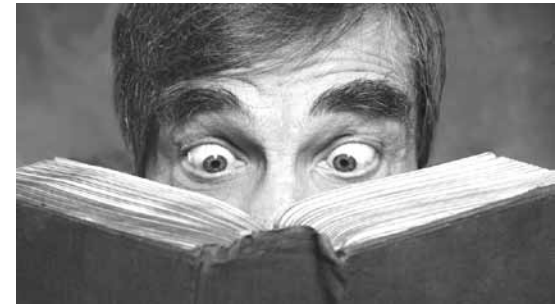
This book is dedicated to writers who brave the steep and never-ending learning curve for writing novels and memoirs, striving to learn and improve.

It's a thank-you to the writers I've worked with in critique groups who have helped me with my own writing and in learning how to coach writers to strengthen story shortcomings.

And the biggest thank-you goes to my wife, Sarah, who has been a patient listener for, well, all the important times and many not so consequential—the companion of my life.

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## From Page to Head, Compellingly

DONALD MAASS, literary agent representing more than 100 novelists, author, teacher, blogger, analyst, and fiction expert says this about what's in *Mastering the Craft of Compelling Storytelling*:

“Ray makes you think about what you are putting down on the page.”

That might seem to be *de rigueur* and of little import, perhaps even damning with faint praise . . . but when it comes to the craft of compelling storytelling, it's what's on the page—and *only* what's on the page—that gets your story into your readers' heads.

Maybe.

And even if it does, will they turn the page?

And then *keep* reading?

There's the rub.

To achieve a page-turner (in the literal sense; no turning the page, no reading the book), you have to think about and deal with many aspects of what you put on the page. I take Don's assessment as a high compliment from a pro.

Wait a minute, you might say, I'm a good writer, I have a knack for prose. Perhaps you're even published in one way or another. You put good stuff on the page.

As literary agent Kristin Nelson says,

“I think writers assume that good writing is enough. Well, it’s not.”

Ouch.

On her blog, *Agent in the Middle*, veteran literary agent Lori Perkins says this:

“Your novel has to grab me by the first page, which is why I can reject you on page one.”

Some are even quicker than that. Dan Conaway, an executive editor turned literary agent at Writers House, says:

“I know most of what I need to know about a writer’s chops in about a line and a half.”

Again, ouch.

On the editorial side, Chuck Adams, Executive Editor of Algonquin Books, put it this way:

“You can usually tell after a paragraph—a page, certainly—whether or not you’re going to get hooked.”

Okay, you might say, but those are literary agents and editors who see hundreds of submissions. They’ve got callouses on their frontal lobes and it takes a bludgeon to hook them, but I’m an Indie author. I’m going to publish myself, so I don’t need to worry about what they think. I’ll appeal directly to readers.

Oh, will you? If you think literary agents and editors are tough, wait until a reader squints at your first page with taking

money out of their pocket on the line. Sol Stein, publisher-editor-author-playwright, writes in *Stein on Writing* of his observations in a bookstore:

“In the fiction section, the most common pattern was for the browser to read the front flap of the book’s jacket and then go to page one. No browser went beyond page three before either taking the book to the cashier or putting it down and picking up another to sample.”

I’ll wager you have even less time on Amazon.com or another online bookseller where you’re one swift click away from goodbye.

What did those bookstore browsers see in the novels they chose to purchase, and what did they fail to see in the rejects?

Were the rejects missing fulsome description?

Great dialogue?

Fascinating characters?

Deep themes?

Nope. Just one thing.

## STORY

Bookstore and website browsers of novels and memoirs—and agents and editors—either see *immediate* signs of a story they want to read, or they do not. They either feel compelled to keep reading, or they do not. As quickly as within a single page.

You do it too, don’t you?

It’s not like when you ask a family member, or a friend, or even a critique partner to read your new novel—they have to read your stuff, and their responses are colored by knowing you. It doesn’t get tough until you’re asking someone to pay for your



novel or memoir—a purchase by a reader, an agent spending her time and reputation by offering your book, or an editor gambling on the cost to print and market it.

To move your book toward the cash register, to generate a request by an agent for the full manuscript, or to make it to an editorial meeting by an acquisitions editor, you need to kick-start your story, sentence by sentence, on your opening page.

And then you have to keep the pages turning

Are you starting to think about what you're putting on your pages?

On my blog, *Flogging the Quill*, I've critiqued first chapters and prologues submitted by, at this writing, more than 800 aspiring novelists and memoirists. My challenge to these writers is to craft a first page that *compels* me to turn the page and read more. Page-turns by me and many of my readers are few and far between.

I also teach a workshop at writers' conferences called "Crafting a Killer First Page." In the workshop we read a first page and then the class votes on whether or not they would turn the page. The percentage of "no" votes goes up as they read more and more pages and see what doesn't work. One workshopper whose first page came up at the middle of the class told me later that he voted against his own work because of what he'd learned by the time we got to it.

To define "compel:"

com • pel

verb

a. to force

b. to urge irresistibly

But do you really need to *compel*? Remember what Lori Perkins said:

"Your novel has to grab me by the first page, which is why I can reject you on page one."

Or, as Donald Maass says in his book, *Writing the Breakout Novel*,

"To hold our attention, a novel's action needs to compel us to read every word."

There's that word again. And when Donald is talking about a novel's action, it is your storytelling and only your storytelling that can deliver the ability for your narrative to compel.

It's what you put on the page.

So here's what I'm going to deal with in this book to help you think about what you're putting there in ways to make it not only deliver your story and your characters, but in ways that keep the reader reading.

## SECTION 1: WORDCRAFT

We'll start at the granular level—your word choices and the ways in which you use them. Just as a painter must master mixing hues to achieve the desired effect, writers need to hone their ability to mix and order words to write for effect.

Some might think spending time on words is beneath their level of ability—to that I'll let bestselling thriller author M.J. Rose respond with her view of the coaching you'll encounter:

"It reminds me of important things about fiction writing."

Or, as author Pete Barber, *NanoStrike*, says:

"I still skim through 'Mastering the Craft' before I undertake a major edit. It helps to remind me about the basics—first learned and easiest forgotten."

You'll find the wordcraft section useful if you haven't thought about how these words can weaken your narrative:

- present participles
- without
- some
- very
- of
- eyes
- started
- with
- as

## **SECTION 2: TECHNIQUE**

There are tools of your trade akin to the brushes and palette knives of a painter.

*Storytelling techniques.* The “telling/showing” paradigm demystified; dealing with point of view (POV); transitions; flashbacks; avoiding overwriting; and more.

*Description techniques.* I'll show you how to create description that not only describes but characterizes—you'll use *experiential description* to do more than snapshot a scene. I'll cover describing point-of-view characters without breaking POV; how filters distance your reader; shooting yourself in the descriptive foot when it comes to action; how “conclusion” words fail in description; avoiding the lure of overwriting; and more. You'll gain a new insight into adverbs that can enhance description—adverbs are frequently a no-no, but I've found a use that is definitely a yes-yes.

*Dialogue techniques.* The use—and non-use—of dialogue tags; the technique of “beats” to deliver a character's experience, action, and character; how to use one of the most revealing kinds of dialogue, internal monologue; and delivering the sound of speech.

## **SECTION 3: STORY.**

Vital story elements; a first-page checklist; strategies and methods for launching a story; creating tension, characters that readers connect with, story questions, really good bad guys, dimension in characters, and more.

### **WORKOUTS**

Finally, you'll go to work in exercises where you apply the techniques and insights you've gained to real first-page openings created by writers like you who submitted their work to my blog—I'll include my notes and the votes I gave them.



## Benchmark—a pre-test

IN THE ELEVEN “WORKOUTS” at the end of this book, I ask you to apply the coaching herein to samples sent to me by writers. Below is one of the examples you’ll be working on, the opening of a novel sent to me by an Australian writer (note the British punctuation).

To create a benchmark for changes in how you perceive a narrative after reading this book, I suggest you read this excerpt now and decide whether or not you would turn the page.

Then evaluate its strengths and shortcomings, and think about how you would edit it and/or what comments you would give the writer to make it stronger. Then carry on. This is what would be the first sixteen lines on a manuscript’s first page:

‘Michael’s gone!’ Julia screamed into the payphone outside Flinders Street Train Station.’

‘Calm down, Mrs Stewart. She’ll be with you shortly.’

Julia bristled at the matter-of-factness of the receptionist’s voice. ‘I don’t care if she’s with the Queen. My husband is missing. I think I’m losing my mind.’

‘Please hold and I’ll see if I can interrupt.’

Click. Mozart replaced the receptionist’s voice. The familiar hold music from the past sounded surreal against

the background tram and traffic noise of the Melbourne thoroughfare.

A pedestrian bumped into her daughter’s stroller, turning Shellie to tears.

‘Stop that, you bad girl!’ Julia rolled the stroller under the phone box, putting her child out of the way of the Friday afternoon commuters.

Shellie reached out and cried louder.

‘Arrgghh!’ Julia dropped the receiver, picked up the three year old and settled her on her hip. Shellie quieted, distracted now by an earring.

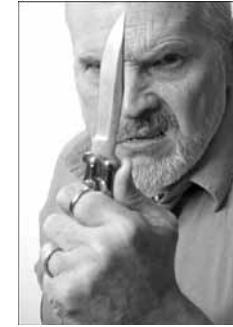
Ignoring her, Julia reached for the dangling receiver, and found silence. ‘Hello? Hello!’ *Don’t be gone. I don’t have any more change.*

‘I thought I’d lost you.’ The receptionist’s cheerfulness was enough to piss off anyone.

Okay, now dive in.



## Section 1: Wordcraft



### Writing for effect

IF YOU WANT READERS to turn your pages, here's the *effect* you want your writing to have on them—to trigger in them the sights and sounds and smells and feelings and movement of what's happening in the story. Readers don't want approximations, they want the story's reality. They should *experience* the story, not just learn about what happens. And by "experience the story" I mean experience the *character's* story.

Memoirist and writing teacher Sheila Bender, *A New Theology: Turning to Poetry in a Time of Grief*, talks about writing a memoir in such a way that the reader becomes you. I think the thing to strive for in fiction is for your reader to become the character(s).

I call it *writing for effect*, the root of compelling storytelling. It's your writing craft that empowers your storytelling to sink its fingers into readers' imaginations and compel them to want to know what happens next.

Writing for effect is the core craft principle underlying my approach to creating an irresistible fiction narrative that immerses a reader in the experience of the story.

It's the lens through which I critique narrative in an edit and strive to view my own writing.

It's the objective that informs the coaching on storytelling, dialogue, description, and technique in this book.

It's knowing how to show and when to tell. It's why adverbs are often weak writing—and sometimes just the opposite, creators of nuance and subtlety that evoke a character's reality.

Writing for effect is the guiding light that can show you the way to a stronger story, and the searchlight that can illuminate shortcomings in your manuscript.

Failure to write for effect is why too many writers, especially beginning authors, do little more than put information on the page and end up with a report with a plot, not a novel or memoir.

In storytelling, you're not writing to inform the reader—you deliver information, of course, but that's not the purpose—you're writing to affect the reader. To craft narrative that creates an effect in the reader's mind—the experience of the story.

**BASICALLY, IT'S ALL ABOUT STIMULUS/RESPONSE.**

Maybe it's the psychology major in me, but I can't help but think of the stimulus/response paradigm. Pavlov taught dogs to expect food when he rang a bell, and thereafter the dogs salivated at the sound of that bell.

The reader provides the response to the words you use, visualizing a scene or seeing an action or experiencing a character or, even better, *feeling* an emotion. To complicate matters, there's a reader element involved that you can't make go your way—the reader's personal knowledge, filters, and baggage. A dog not trained to associate feeding with a bell won't salivate at the sound of one. The word “cat” has a different effect on a cat lover than it does on a cat hater. You can't control that, but you can still load your narrative gun with the best possible ammo. In practice, the workings of stimulus/response aren't simple, but they are the keys to writing for effect, and understanding that can open the door to successful storytelling.

You begin a story with a single stimulus—a word. Here's one now:

Vladimir's

With the exception of verbs, most words can't do much by themselves, so you string words into a sentence that forms a different stimulus.

Vladimir's blade cut Johnson's throat, and  
Vladimir smiled.

Change the words and the *effect* is different.

Vladimir's blade sliced open Johnson's throat,  
and Vladimir smiled.

To my mind, *sliced open* is far more visually evocative than *cut*.

Another part of the effect here is to characterize Vladimir—for some reason, he enjoyed slicing open a man's throat. And this sentence raises story questions: Why did he slice the throat, and why did he smile? Is he a good guy or a bad guy?

All that from just one sentence of nine words.

Although we're writing for effect and the accumulating stimuli produce a dramatic portrayal of what's happening, we haven't yet reached the level of delivering the experience of the story. That experience comes through the character.

Vladimir is the point-of-view character, but this narrative is objective so far, shallow, a camera's view. Novels provide a unique way to create an experience—going deeper to show what's happening in a character's mind.

Vladimir's blade sliced open Johnson's throat.  
The child-killer toppled, hands clutching his  
neck, blood flowing between his fingers. Vladim-  
mir watched him writhe and then become still.  
The bittersweet taste of vengeance filled Vladimir,  
and he smiled.

Your sentences accrue and, done well, coalesce into a greater stimulus—the story. The final result, the effect on your reader, begins with the word choices you make and how you put them together.



### **Adverbs: Good? Bad? Yes.**

PERHAPS YOU'VE HEARD the view that you shouldn't use adverbs—bestselling author Elmore Leonard was dead set against them. Mostly, I agree. You should pitilessly weed out many of the adverbs that lurk in your manuscript because they are telling posing as showing.

Here's a simple-minded example of why adverbs can be the bane of writing for effect. A story starts with this:

Jimmy walked slowly across the cluttered room.

Simple information. I see, fuzzily, a guy walking. Not very fast (but I can't really picture it). There's stuff in the room (but who knows what).

The effect? Not much. No clear picture comes to mind. First thing to do: ditch the verb/adverb combo and choose a verb that evokes a picture, at the least, and at best characterizes the action. If, for example, your story is suspense, then how about . . .

Jimmy *crept* across the cluttered room.

Better. Following are other variations, depending on the nature of the story:

In a fight scene, Jimmy would have *lunged* across the room.

If Jimmy is a dancer, then he *glided*.

Make Jimmy a burglar and he *skulked*.

If Jimmy is in no hurry, then he *ambled*.

If Jimmy is in a hurry, then he *dashed*.

If Jimmy has been over-served at a bar, then he *weaved*.

Or maybe he *tottered*, or *staggered*, or *lurched*, or, my personal favorite, *sloshed*.

Each of those verbs evokes a picture of Jimmy's body moving in specific ways. They are "visual" verbs that created a specific effect in your mind.

Stimulus > response.

There's another bit of lazy writing in the example sentence—the adjective "cluttered." It did nothing to create a picture. At the very least, we should see what the room was cluttered with, e.g.:

Jimmy crept across a room cluttered with  
shrunken heads.

Ooooo. See how specificity stirs up story questions? Don't you want more? What about the room? Is it dark? Any smells? Sounds? Is anyone else there? What about characterization? Put on Jimmy's skin and . . .

He was glad that the light of his candle was dim—all those tiny faces staring up at him were entirely too creepy. He set a foot down and winced at a crunch. He froze, listening for sounds of renewed pursuit. But only the scurrying of rats troubled the air, musty with the dust of the dead.

Rats?

Oh, fine.

Back to adverbs. There's a reason adverbs rob you of effect.

### **ADVERBS ARE TELLING**

I believe that adverbs that modify action verbs are merely a form of telling. They are abstractions of action, pallid substitutes for the real thing, mere stand-ins for showing. In a sense, they are "conclusion" words. As a result, they rarely give the reader much of an experience.

For example, one of my clients wrote,

She grinned mischievously.

The adverb tries to tell us the nature of the grin. Now, the average reader would probably plug in some sort of vague image of a grin, keep on rolling, and never realize she had been cheated—but she was. There's a much more lively and concrete picture to be created in the reader's mind. For example:

She grinned, mischief sparking in her eyes.

In the original, because you have to interpret "mischievously" (what, exactly, is that?) the effect is to evoke an unsure image of a grin. In the second, you see a face in action: lips curve, you see a grin, you see eyes, you see playful activity behind those eyes. All that from four extra words chosen for effect.

Or, hey, what about something like this . . .

She grinned like a fox that had just found the  
key to the henhouse.

The example above goes beyond word choice to use a simile that taps into meaning and characterization greater than a simple visual.

In writing this, I decided to check my manuscripts for adverbs and soon spotted one posing as description. Here's the sentence:

She saw Murphy, like a big, round boulder parting a stream of girly secretaries cramming in a buzz of noontime shopping—except this boulder stared blatantly at their bobbing chests as they passed.

“Stared blatantly?” Definitely another case of making an adverb try to do the work of real description—it's telling me the nature, the effect, of the stare, not showing it. To be fair, this was from my first novel, written several years ago, on the lower slopes of my learning curve.

In this case the answer lay, as usual, in the verb. I swapped out “stared blatantly” for “leered.” Much better, giving a clear picture with fewer words and adding semantic overtones. While I was at it, I tightened the sentence a little, too:

She saw Murphy, like a big, round boulder parting a stream of girly secretaries cramming in a buzz of noontime shopping, leering at their bobbing chests.

#### **WATCH OUT FOR ADVERBS IN DIALOGUE TAGS**

Many writers use adverbs to explain dialogue rather than show how the dialogue is delivered. For example:

“This is my dialogue,” he said hesitantly.

That's lazy use of an adverb. You could say this . . .

He hesitated, then said, “This is my dialogue.”

But that's not precisely what “said hesitantly” means, is it? It suggests a hesitation somewhere in the speech. Wouldn't it be more effective if we *dramatized* the hesitation so the reader actually experiences a pause rather than reads about one?

“This . . .” He swallowed and glanced at her face.  
“. . . is my dialogue.”

Go on an adverb hunt in your manuscript and replace them with the action they only hint at and you'll be writing for effect.

#### **I DISCOVER THAT NOT ALL ADVERBS ARE BAD GUYS**

When doing my manuscript check, I came upon a pair of adverbs in one sentence . . .

He found Emmaline to be annoyingly cheerful  
but pleasingly proficient.

But these adverbs worked for me. Wait, I thought, how come they feel right when I've preached loud and long to avoid adverbs? Then I realized that they modified adjectives rather than verbs. Aha!

#### **GOOD CHOLESTEROL AND BAD CHOLESTEROL**

There was a time we were told that all cholesterol was bad. Then we learned that there is good cholesterol and bad cholesterol.

Well, I changed my position that all adverbs are suspect, if not bad. I think there are “good” adverbs, story-friendly adverbs that add just the right flavor to an adjective, enhancing it with a more complete shade of meaning.

Consider the sentence describing Emmaline. Could I have achieved what I wanted, which was to give insight into one character's feeling and attitudes toward another, without the adverbs?



He found Emmaline to be cheerful but proficient.

Nope. I've lost how the viewpoint character feels about Emmaline as *annoyingly* cheerful and *pleasingly* proficient—these two adverbs characterize the point-of-view character as a curmudgeon who is capable of being positive as well. And without them the “but” has to become “and” because the contrast is lost.

I went on a search for other adverbs and found . . .

Her fair cheeks fetchingly reddened by the cold,  
she looked no older than a teenager.

Yep, for me this works. It would have been okay to write . . .

Her fair cheeks reddened by the cold, she looked  
no older than a teenager.

. . . and you would have gotten a picture. But take “fetchingly” out and you lose the point-of-view character’s internal response to the girl’s coloring. With the addition of the adverb to this adjective, you also get the character’s experience, i.e. his emotional reaction to the appearance he sees—fetching, attractive.

The pattern I was discovering seemed to be that adverbs are a positive addition when coupled to adjectives in order to add a point-of-view character’s nuance to what would otherwise be simple description. Another instance from the same manuscript:

He loved the Staffordshire blue-and-white rose  
pattern, beautifully detailed and botanically  
accurate right down to the thorns on the stems.

Take “beautifully” and “botanically” out of that sentence and I think it loses both meaning and flavor. One more:

She changed her disguise to the queenly dignity  
of a white-haired society matron she’d met in  
Brussels.

To “show” the quality of her dignity without the adverb would have required something like this:

She changed her disguise to that of a dignified,  
white-haired society matron she’d met in Brus-  
sels who’d had the manner of a queen.

Not as effective, is it? “Queenly” adds an element of royalty and all that goes with it to the woman’s appearance to signal a great deal to the reader—erect posture, chin up, perhaps an aloof gaze, a look of being in charge—with just one word.

Here’s an example taken from a client’s manuscript of a good adverb and bad adverb in the same sentence:

A young waiter with carefully streaked hair  
smiled suggestively at her.

For me, the first adverb expands the waiter’s character by giving a sense of precision and extra care taken in the arrangement of the streaks, which tells me something about him as well. But I’d like to see the second adverb replaced with something more truly pictorial.

When you go hunting for adverbs, it’s when they modify action that you should consider looking for a better verb to do the job, and when they amplify adjectives that you may find adverbs to be good cholesterol.

Similarly, keep an eye out for instances where an adjective can be enhanced by an adverb to characterize the point-of-view character.