

Reading Recommendations for Writers



WELCOME to the Blue Garret

I'm Kristen Tate, a freelance book editor focused on fiction and creative nonfiction. In 2019 I set out to read and review a writing craft book every week for my newsletter and blog. By the end of the year, I had read forty-two books of writing advice.

The most important thing I can tell you about that experience is that you don't need to read forty-two books! In fact, you might need just one to vault you past the place where you are stuck.



What you'll find in this guide

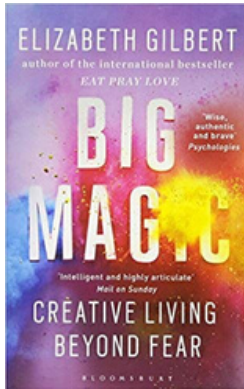
- My **recommendations for books** that might help you work through specific writing quandaries
- My advice on **how to read a book efficiently** and effectively, drawn from my many years of graduate school as well as this year of reading
- My **top tips** from the authors I read this year—those nuggets of advice I find myself passing along to the writers I work with again and again

Happy reading!

Kristen

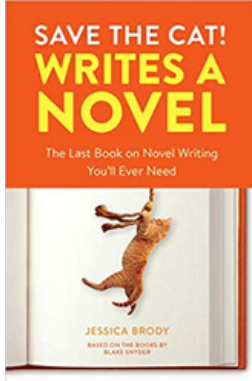
RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no “best” book—no single writing craft book to rule them all. Humans are weird, idiosyncratic creatures, and writers perhaps most of all. A book that thrilled me might leave you cold. The best book is the one whose voice you trust and whose advice you will take.



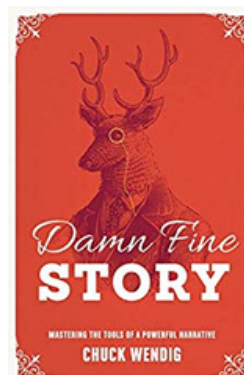
You have writer's block

Pick up Elizabeth Gilbert's *Big Magic* if you need warm, empathetic reassurance that, yes, this is hard and, yes, you can do it. Take a look at Twyla Tharp's *Creative Habit* if you need a tough-love, get-over-yourself approach, along with inventive exercises to get you unstuck. Try Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* if you want to establish a regular writing practice.



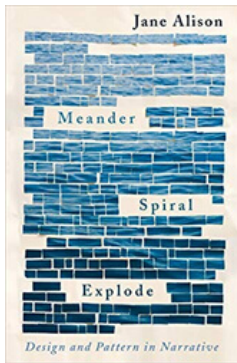
You have questions about genre

Jessica Brody provides a clear, thorough taxonomy of common story types in *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel*, as well as specific tips for each one. Shawn Coyne's discussion of genre in *Story Grid* is more theoretical but can be supplemented with blog posts and podcasts from [his website](#).



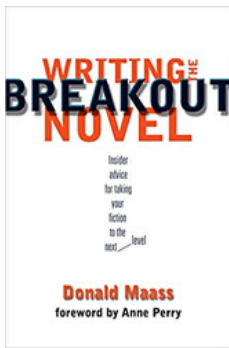
You get stuck a third of the way into every manuscript

You may have exhausted the creative possibilities of your original situation and now need to figure out the next plot steps that will carry you to the ending. Studying story structure may provide you the clues you need. Chuck Wendig's *Damn Fine Story* provides clear explanations of basic story structure, as well as a list of possible plot moves to get you through the “mushy middle.”



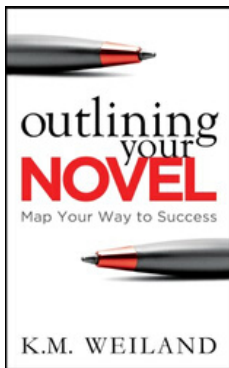
You want to write a novel that doesn't follow the traditional three-act structure

In *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, Jane Alison questions why our stories so often follow a wave pattern of rising action, climax, and resolution and offers up a banquet of alternative possibilities.



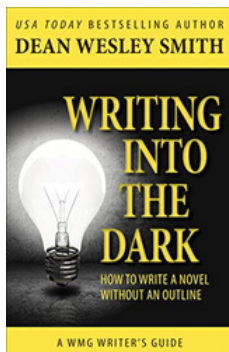
You're an experienced writer and want to study the finer points of commercial fiction

Donald Maass's *Writing the Breakout Novel* looks at what separates great novels from merely good ones. John Truby's *The Anatomy of Story* is somewhat too prescriptive for my tastes, but he digs deeper into story structure than any other writer I know and is worth studying.



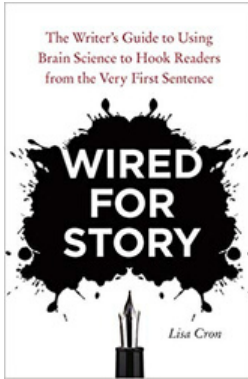
You are a pantser who wants to learn how to plot

K. M. Weiland's *Outlining Your Novel* provides clear, action-oriented steps for you to follow. James Frey gives concrete tips for outlining in *How to Write a Damn Good Mystery*, delivered in a sometimes combative tone that may or may not work for you. James Scott Bell's *Write Your Novel from the Middle* offers a new way of seeing the overall structure of your novel that might provide a good bridge for moving from pantsing to plotting.



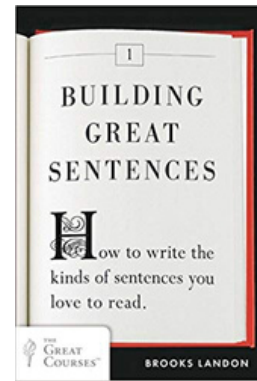
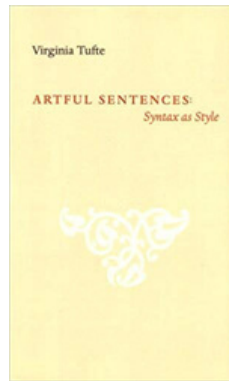
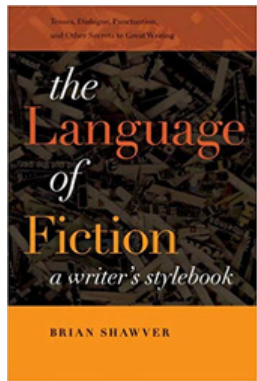
You are a plotter who wants to learn how to pants

Dean Wesley Smith's methods in *Writing into the Dark* may help you move more quickly from idea to execution. James Scott Bell's *Write Your Novel from the Middle* may also help you start drafting with only a few key waypoints decided.



Your characters are lackluster

If you can't seem to get the characters in your head to come alive on the page, go straight to Lisa Cron's *Wired for Story*, which is a master class in how to write character-driven fiction. Elizabeth George, known for the psychological depth of her characters, also has some excellent tips for character creation in *Write Away*.



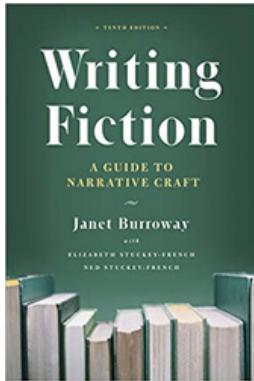
Your sentences are boring, or you are bored writing them

Brian Shawver's *The Language of Fiction* is the best all-around style guide for fiction writers I've found. Don't start with grammar books (or with your old copy of *The Elements of Style*); start with Shawver. If you want to go deeper, I'd recommend Virginia Tufte's *Artful Sentences*, paired with Brooks Landon's *Building Great Sentences*, which provides the grammar explanations and writing exercises Tufte's book lacks.



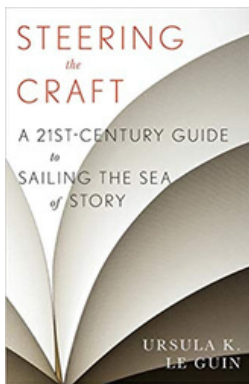
You've gotten vague feedback from agents or readers

Jessica Morrell's *Thanks, but This Isn't for Us* will help you identify the problems these readers are struggling to articulate, and will likely help you see other problems in your manuscript as well.



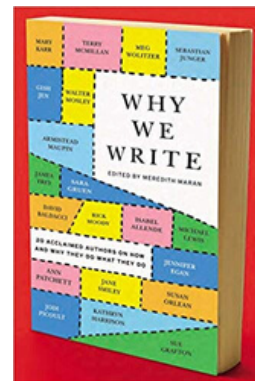
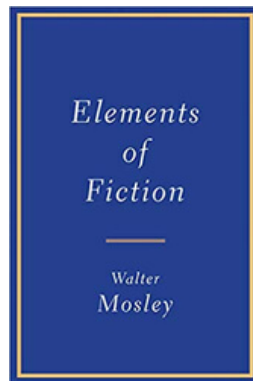
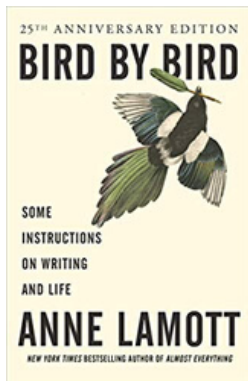
You want to learn the basics

Janet Burroway’s *Writing Fiction* is commonly used as a Creative Writing 101 textbook, so it’s a good place to start (be sure to get the tenth edition, published in 2019, for its excellent and diverse example passages).



You want to establish a critique or study group for writers

Ursula Le Guin’s *Steering the Craft* has sound, practical advice on setting up such a group. For groups who want to work through exercises instead of or before sharing their own works-in-progress, the exercises in Janet Burroway’s *Writing Fiction* would be a good place to start. Groups interested in working on sentence-level writing issues should look to the exercises in Brian Shawver’s *The Language of Fiction* and Brooks Landon’s *Building Great Sentences*.



You want to remember why you are doing this hard thing anyway

When you get to that inevitable point where you want to burn everything you’ve done and walk away, read Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird* or Walter Mosley’s *Elements of Fiction* for reminders about why writing matters. Or pick up *Why We Write*, edited by Meredith Maran, to see other writers discussing the pain and frustration (and triumphs) of writing.



HOW TO READ A BOOK

Now that you've got your reading list—maybe one that's longer than you intended—how do you tackle it? Here are my tips for reading efficiently and effectively.

Set your intentions

Reread the blurb, on the back cover or online, and think about what you hope to learn from this book. You can even write down your intention at the top of your notes, which will help you stay focused.

Move on if it isn't helpful

If the book has been sitting in your to-be-read pile for years, make sure you still think you will benefit from it. If you've moved on, take the book to the nearest Little Free Library and go on to the next. You are not in school and no one has assigned you this book.

Get the lay of the land

Read through the table of contents carefully and make a mental or physical note about which sections interest you most. Are there exercises or checklists you want to use, now or in the future? Is there material you think you can skip or skim?

Start reading!

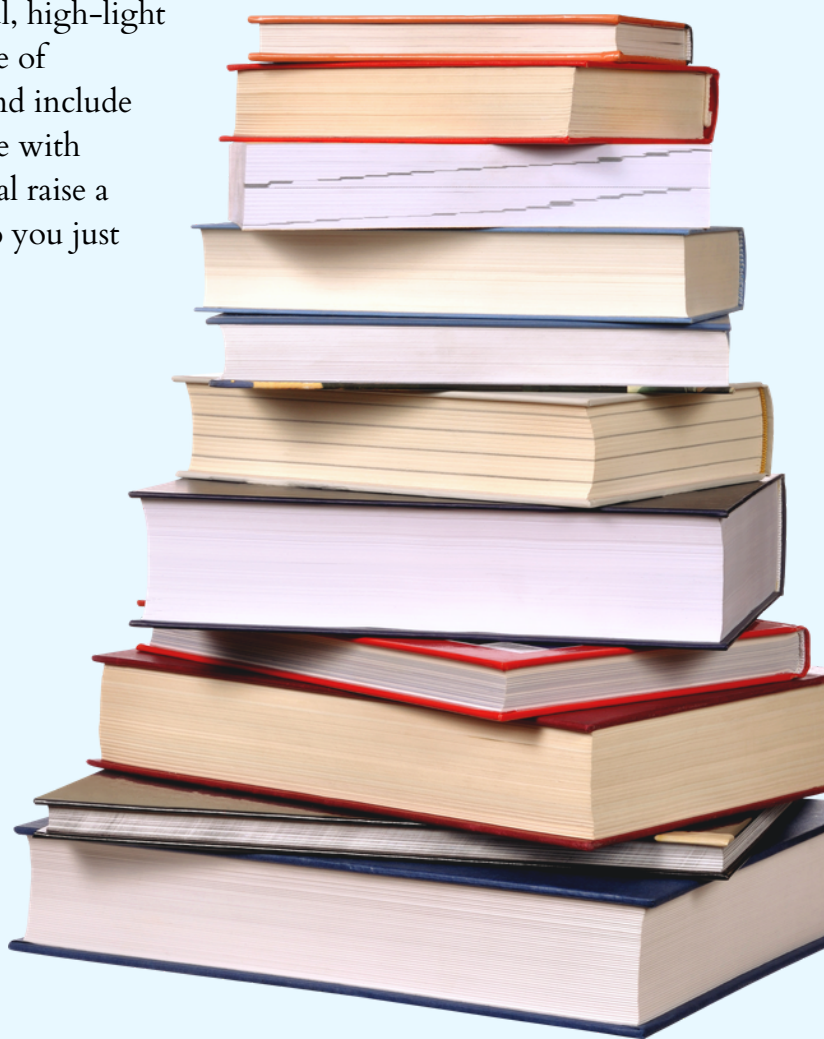
If this is a chapter you've planned to skim, use section headers and the first sentences of paragraphs like rocks you are landing on as you skip across a river. If you feel sure of your footing, hop forward. If you need to catch your balance or just look around, read every word. When you come to an example, skip it for now if you already understand the principle it illustrates. Remember to keep checking in with your intentions and alter your reading plan if you find something un-expectedly valuable (or worthless). Not every word of every book is going to be helpful for you.

Take notes

As you go, highlight sentences where the author summarizes or recaps a section or chapter. When you come across a section that is especially helpful, highlight the section header or make a note in the table of contents. Track your thoughts as you read and include them in your notes. Does this author disagree with another author you've read? Does the material raise a question you want to investigate further? Do you just need to say, "WTF?"

Make a knowledge database

If you have written physical notes, collect all of them in one place where you can refer back to them easily. If you are highlighting and taking notes on an e-reader, figure out how to copy and paste them into another program. (Remember, always, that what Amazon giveth, Amazon can taketh away. That handy Kindle highlights page may not be around forever.) This is your knowledge database that you will return to when you are starting a new book.



TOP TIPS from a year of reading

Remember that a tool or tactic is not yours until you use it. There is no point in reading craft books if you then just stick to your old familiar writing routines. Take notes on what you read and then review your notes periodically. If something in this list resonates with you, write it on a sticky note right now and let it live on a wall in your writing space until it has sunk into your subconscious.

1

Read novels, especially those in your genre. Study novels you love—they are made of words, not magic. If you read enough, the basic structures of stories and sentences will already be embedded in your brain before you start writing. As Steven King puts it, readers “come to the country of the writer with [their] papers and identification pretty much in order.”

2

“Write what you like to read,” advises James N. Frey. If your true love is mysteries, don’t write literary fiction because that’s what your MFA teacher expects. Likewise, if literary fiction is your jam, don’t write mysteries because you think they’ll make more money.

3

“You do not need anybody’s permission to live a creative life.” Elizabeth Gilbert says so. Make yourself a permission slip and put it on the wall where you—and everyone around you—will see it.

4

However, **to be creative is to wrestle with fear.** Face it down the way Twyla Tharp does: “I borrow a biblical epigraph from Dostoyevsky’s *The Demons*: I see my fears being cast into the bodies of wild boars and hogs, and I watch them rush to a cliff where they fall to their deaths.”

5

One way around the fear is to **regard your writing as play and treat your tools as toys**, advises Walter Moseley. Imagine that blank page as “a big blue pond at dawn. All we have to do is jump in and flail around, laughing and discovering.” And, Isabelle Allende reminds us, “words are free!”

6

Another route around the fear is to give yourself permission, as Anne Lamott does, to **write “really, really shitty first drafts.”**

7

If you struggle with writer’s block, try “cycling.” In *Writing into the Dark*, Dean Wesley Smith notes that revising and adding to the previous session’s work can help you build momentum to vault into the blank page.

8

Character is the beating heart of the story. As Lisa Cron puts it, “Story is visceral. We climb inside the protagonist’s skin and become sensate, feeling what he feels.”

9

Likewise, Chuck Wendig reminds us that **every character in a novel is the protagonist of their own story.** If the character is an ally, their story might run parallel to that of the main character. If they are an antagonist, it might intersect.

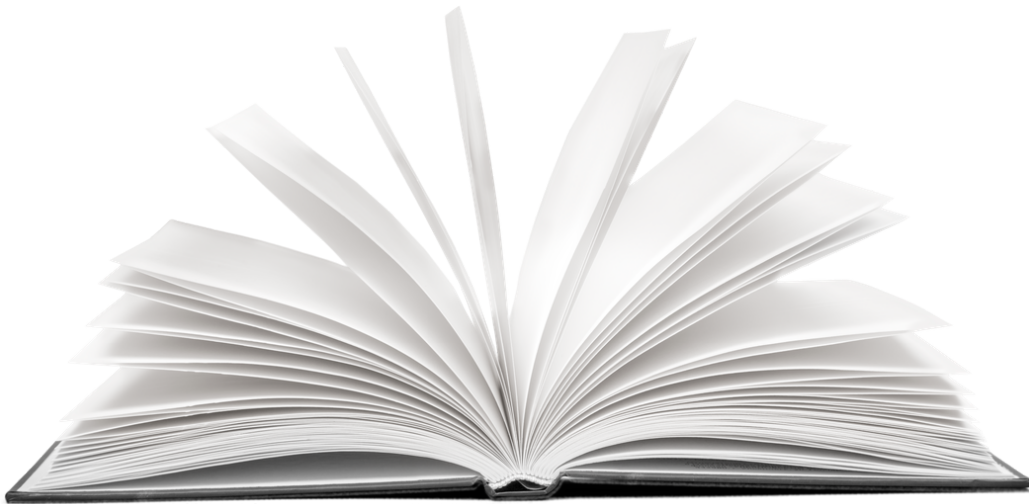


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Use both external and internal conflict to fuel your plot. Jessica Morrell captures this in a perfect metaphor: “Think about the external conflict as the dragon in the story because this reminds us that it can be seen, heard, and felt, while internal conflict—your character’s emotional and psychological struggles, or inner conflict—can be called the demon.”

11

Look for a “mirror moment” at the midpoint of your novel. According to James Scott Bell, in a character-driven novel, the protagonist might ask, *What am I becoming?* In a plot-driven novel, they might ask, *How can I possibly beat the high odds against me? Should I go on?*



12

The dramatic arc is only one of many possible patterns for a story. What if, Jane Alison asks, a novel meandered or spiraled or exploded rather than arced?

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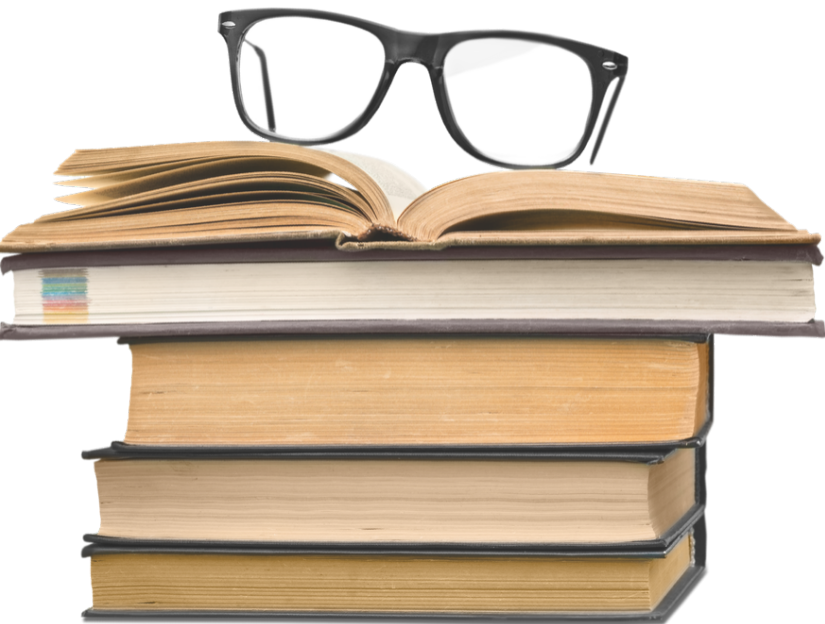
Backstory elements must pass three tests, according to Sandra Scofield: “You need to tell it. This is the right time to do so. It has a consequence, emotional or physical, for the character.”

14

Choose settings that carry psychological or metaphorical weight, advises Donald Maas. Give your characters “an active relationship to place” by showing their “growth (or decline) through their relationships to their various surroundings.”

16

Showing rather than telling is not just a technique, it's a mindset. Helen Corner-Bryant and Kathryn Price argue that the point of showing is “to make your reader experience the sensation of a scene.”



15

Layer background activities behind dialogue scenes. Elizabeth George calls these activities THADs, Talking Head Avoidance Devices. A well-chosen THAD “reveals character; it may in and of itself contain important information; it can be used as a metaphor.”

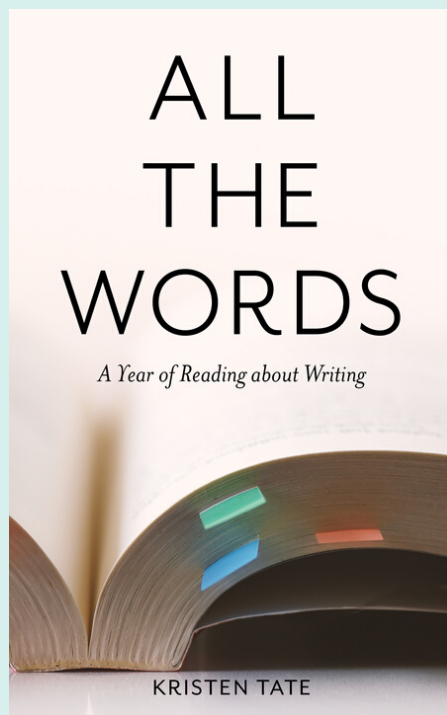
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Learn how to use interior monologue and narrative summary, two tools that are peculiarly suited to fiction (as opposed to a visual medium like film). As Renni Browne and Dave King note, “On the page, readers can see how [a character] feels because they have the opportunity to move from action to thought and back again without ever being aware that anything out of the ordinary is happening.”

18

“Good and careful writers will blow all Rules of Writing into bits,” proclaims Ursula K. LeGuin, to which I would only add that you must know the rules in order to break them effectively.

I hope this guide was helpful! If you'd like to read more, I've collected all of the reviews from my year of reading into a book, ***All the Words: A Year of Reading about Writing***.



Available now
on Amazon

BUY

In 2020, I'm focusing on the art and craft of revision in my newsletter. I hope you'll follow along and let me know how you approach this crucial aspect of the writing process.