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President's Voice

By Tawdra Kandle



Last month, I bade a fond farewell to two departing board members. In January, our new *Nink* crew took over, led by Harper St. George as the Editor in Chief, representing the newsletter on the board and overseeing the acquisition, editing, and distribution processes. We also hired Cheré Coen as our new Acquisition Editor. Harper and Cheré join our ongoing staff, which includes Cynthia Moyer as the copy editor and Laura Resnick in layout, formatting, and distribution. We're happy to have such a wonderful team in place.

Nink is just one of the year-round benefits of being a member of Novelists, Inc. Recently, a fellow author told me that several of her friends had said that if they can't attend our annual conference, there wasn't any good reason to be a NINC member. I'm going to respectfully disagree with this sentiment because in my admittedly biased view, there are wonderful reasons for being part of NINC all year long.

As an organization, we offer exclusive discounts and benefits with our partner vendors. The awesome Emilie Richards currently oversees curating and promoting these benefits—be sure to check *Nink* and the website for updated links and offers.

(Speaking of our website . . . the leadership is painfully aware of the limitations and lackings of our current site, and one of our goals for 2021 is to recreate ninc.com so that it is an appealing and easy-to-navigate benefit for all of our members. Look for more updates on that process in upcoming newsletters.)

Also, as a NINC member, you can apply for use of the Legal Fund, which entitles you to the equivalent of the cost of two hours of legal time in the event that you need to seek counsel in connection to your author business.

We also offer interaction and networking with other authors through our NINCLink group (email) and our NINC group on Facebook. If you prefer in-person networking and support (in a non-pandemic time, of course!), several areas of the country have created their own NINC-related local groups. While these do not fall under the official auspices of NINC, any member is welcome to form such a group by posting on the Loop or in the Facebook group. The perfect place to begin learning more—or reminding yourself—all of the benefits of being a NINC

member is right here in this newsletter. Check out the **NINC Membership Benefits** page of this newsletter for quick links to everything I've mentioned.

Our conferences are amazing, and I know I look forward to them every year. I can't wait to be back in St. Pete Beach in September to hang out with my tribe and learn **all** the things. But don't forget that NINC is a tremendous value throughout the other fifty-one weeks of the year, too.

Be sure to read Programming Chair Lisa Hughey's update on the conference in this issue of *Nink*! She and our entire committee are putting together a fabulous event.

Until we chat again in March . . .

Tawdra Kandle

Tawdra Kandle is a USA Today best-selling romance author with over 80 books released. Her titles include new adult and adult contemporary romance; under the pen name Tamara Kendall, she writes paranormal romance, and under the pen name Tessa Kent, she writes erotic romance.

About NINC

NINC remains committed to serving all of our members, regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, religious/spiritual beliefs if any, ability, nationality or age. It is NINC's desire and goal to make sure that every author member feels welcomed and accepted and heard.

About *Nink*

Nink's goal is to provide our readers with high-quality articles that offer critical business advice, marketing how-tos, advanced craft coaching, or strategy to continue building a career, all geared to established authors. All members should feel confident that *Nink* provides something for them. We welcome pitches and submissions from all members; [propose an article](#) or submit a [letter to the editor](#).

NINC Member Benefits

Don't forget to sign up for the [email loop](#), [critique/brainstorming group](#), and the members-only [Facebook group](#) if you haven't already. The Pro Services Directory, member [discount page](#), and [sample letters](#) are also great resources.

Missing a newsletter? Past issues can be found [here](#).

Accessing the NINC Website

Not sure how to log in to the NINC website? Visit the login page here: <https://ninc.com/membership-overview/login-to-ninc/>



I'm so pleased to announce **Level Up** as the theme for this year's NINC conference to be held at the lovely TradeWinds Resort, **September 22-26th**.

Registration will open in **March**.

At this time, we are planning on a reduced capacity conference. If and when the federal guidelines allow, we will expand the number of attendees. We will be following safety protocols to keep all our members safe.

We already have a fabulous line up of speakers. We will begin announcing the speakers and topics next month. Happy 2021 and stay safe and healthy!

Lisa Hughey

NINC 2021 Conference Programming Chair

Running Contests

Two authors explain their process

By Michele Dunaway



Contests can be a good way to develop your mailing list and to build your online presence. However, they can also be a waste of time and money, if not done right. A quick Google search reveals dozens of articles on how to run a contest and you can find a few resources at the end of the article. Therefore, the focus of this article will be on two authors who have successfully run contests as part of their careers.

Glynnis Campbell

USA Today Best Selling Author [Glynnis Campbell](#) runs contests weekly and has “well, since I can remember.” She has a weekly newsletter which creates an opportunity to contact readers often without annoying them with “Buy-buy-buy” messages. “My monthly email is newsy, but my weekly winner notices are fun, short and to the point,” she said. “I also award extra entries for things like tweeting about my free books, following me on Amazon and signing up for my newsletter.”

Campbell uses the free version of Rafflecopter and its winner selection. “My contest is simple,” she said. “Click directly on the giveaway link on my website or enter through one of my daily posts on Facebook and you’re in.” And don’t forget the bonus entries.

Campbell determines if her contest is successful at the end of each month, when she adds the emails to her subscriber list. This way she can see how many new readers have entered the giveaway.

As for the cost, most of the time she keeps it simple and inexpensive, using signed books (“legacy paperbacks I bought wholesale from my previous trad publisher”) and sometimes swag or candy “if my son is fundraising for school.” In a survey of her readers, the “hands-down winner was a signed book.”

The time commitment is also minimal, under an hour. Setting up and installing the giveaway once a month takes “about 15 minutes.” Writing the weekly winning newsletter takes the most time, from 15-30 minutes. “That includes searching for images and coming up with the atrocious puns I’m known for, lol,” Campbell said.

One time a contest exceeded her expectations was when she was in a multi-author giveaway. According to Campbell, these are often surprisingly successful when they’re well organized, mostly because the prizes can be large, and the database of readers available for cross-marketing is big.

But she’s also had less successful months. “I’ve had one or two slow months, when despite a large number of entries, they were mostly from existing subscribers,” she said. “But since I’m getting rid of a garage full of backlist books, I try to look at these occasional flops as a decluttering operation!”

Josie Brown

[Josie Brown](#) is a hybrid author—traditionally published with Simon & Schuster and HarperCollins as well as independently published—with over two million copies of her novels in readers’ hands. Her works have appeared at #1 on Amazon and iBooks on numerous occasions.

Brown calls contests one of the many arrows in an author’s promotional quiver that give and maintain an author’s name awareness. “Depending on how engaging a contest is,” Brown said, “it can successfully launch a new book or a new series. An added bonus: it can help an author find new readers and retain readers who are already fans.”

Brown’s goal for running contests is three-fold. She wants to first give the reader a taste of each new release. Next she wants to engage the reader, as opposed to have them just give her a name and email address. Finally, she wants to keep them coming back for more.

Brown has a process for running her contests, saying “People love an opportunity to win something with minimal effort.” Therefore, she follows this process:

1. Ask that they read an excerpt of the book, and to correctly answer one question. That’s it! Then they will be entered.
2. Run the contest on my website. I have a page devoted to it and there are links directly to it on my welcome page, as well as next to any “New Release” page or mentions within my website.
3. Spell out the contest rules specifically—including the fact that no purchase is necessary, and that there is a firm deadline, (usually, 11:59 PM in my time zone, on a specific day).
4. I try to make the question something that is not obvious, but one they’ll find in the written excerpt. [Besides the print excerpt, this time I included an audio version, which I am reading the first chapter of the book.](#) I did this because audiobooks are my next big project.
5. I actually list “Potential Winners” (those who have sent in the correct answer) directly on the Contest page. That way, readers are assured that they are entered; just a little peace of mind.)

6. I promote via my newsletter and through social media—*constantly*—during the duration of the contest.
7. I do a random drawing for the winner. I even make a screenshot and post it on the contest page afterward.
8. I congratulate the winner in my eLetter, as well as via all my social media accounts.

Brown starts her contest a month prior to a book launch. “I keep it going for another 60 days,” she said. “A 90-day contest, both before and after the book’s launch gives it a long tail in the minds of readers, both fans of the series and any new ones it may attract. Considering that most authors put out, say one to three books a year, that means keeping you in the readers’ hearts and minds a LOT longer than a one-week contest. Readers may not find you that first week. You know that by looking at your sales, right?”

Brown feels a generous prize is a great incentive. “In my case, it’s usually a \$100 digital gift card to a bookstore of their choice,” she said. “This way, they receive the prize immediately. Also, they aren’t tied to one store. And while in the past I’ve done Target cards, I feel that a bookstore gift card is one way to reinforce the readers’ and my mutual love for books and remind them how they found me.”

Management of her contest is done via her website, where readers read an excerpt and click a link that takes them to a form where the entrant provides pertinent information: correct answer, name, address, email address, and the kind of eReader they prefer.

“This information goes into a subgroup within my mailing list that shows me they entered this specific contest. If they are long-time followers, all of their previous contest entries show up by their names, as well as if they open my newsletters. This is great info to know,” she said.

(Brown uses MailerLite for her mailing lists.)

One thing Brown does is contact those who answered incorrectly and tell them they can have another shot. “I think that shows goodwill,” she said. “I realize they took time out of their busy day to read it and to provide an answer. At the same time, it’s not fair if I allow someone who answered incorrectly to be entered. Usually I get a note from the potential contestant thanking me for telling them they may have lost a chance at the prize. Readers love personal contact. It’s why I answer every email, even if it’s a mere ‘thank you’ for some musing I’ve sent out in my eLetter.”

Brown knows a contest is successful, quantitatively, if she has several hundred people enter. Also, if her sales numbers rise or stay constant, she knows “the contest is doing its job, that is, allowing readers to sample the book and move forward on a purchase.”

Not all of her contests were successful, and Brown gave three things she learned:

1. I made the contest timetable too short.
2. I forgot to collect email addresses to add to my mailing list.
3. And the biggest failure of all: *I didn’t promote the contest.* (Duh!)

But once a contest exceeded her expectations by bringing in over 700 entries, which included email addresses.

“I love to look at my mailing list analytics and see readers who have followed through, and read my missives, clicked links to purchase books, and consistently enter the contest,” she said. “I feel as if we’re in this together. It’s my way of saying thanks.”

Additional Advice

Both Campbell and Brown have found what works for them. They shared a few more things based on their own experiences.

Mistakes/things I wish I’d known

The number one mistake authors make when running a contest, according to Campbell is to give away non-book prizes. “You run the risk of attracting contest junkies instead of readers interested in your books,” she said. “If you’re paying to send out a newsletter based on subscribers, this means you’re overpaying, and your open rate will probably reflect that. I make exceptions for multi-author giveaways and sometimes give away larger prizes with new releases, but the prizes are still somehow related to reading.”

“I learned that just giving away a book is not as engaging as asking for a little effort on the readers’ part,” Brown said. “By that, I don’t mean that I want them to jump through seven difficult hoops in order to enter. I feel that asking for them to read an excerpt takes minimal effort on their part, and they might actually appreciate the requirement, as it gives them a taste of the book they hope to win.

Format/prize & contest changes over the years

“Choosing the contest question is very important,” Brown added. “You do not want an either/or answer, or to provide a question in which the answer may be easily misconstrued. To remedy this, I make sure the question and the answer are as specific as possible. For example: asking for a specific location, or a name, that is referenced in the excerpt. Sometimes I give a chance for bonus points. These can be earned by linking to their reviews in other books in the same series; or by promoting the new release on social media.”

“I haven’t changed my format much,” Campbell said. “In my daily post on Facebook, I always include a link to my giveaway, which lives on my website. My prize is almost always a signed book. What I’ve done to vary that is thrown in a bag of Halloween candy or a Valentine’s Day card, given prize books to the winner and her selected “reading twin,” and even donated a box of books to the winner’s favorite charity—anything to freshen things up a bit.”

It’s about readers

“Research the cost of mailing things overseas before you open your giveaway internationally,” Campbell said. “You can always make the prize a choice—a signed book for domestic and an ebook for international winners. That way you won’t be excluding foreign readers.”

She also added, “I’m not sure contests *are* essential. I do think giving away something—whether it’s a book of samples, a free first-in-series book, or a reader magnet for joining your newsletter—is a great way to introduce yourself to readers. But it doesn’t necessarily have to be

a contest. The main reasons I use a giveaway are 1) to maintain contact with my readers on a weekly basis in the least annoying way possible and 2) to get rid of the humongous pile of old books cluttering up my garage!”

Brown has similar thoughts that it’s about maintaining contact with readers.

“I cannot emphasize enough that throwing up a contest on your website without any promotion is more or less a waste of your time. If you’re going to run a contest, work it. Engage with readers,” Brown said. “There is a reason why the big guys with similar price points—fast food outlets like McDonald’s, or food products like Kellogg’s and General Mills—run contests. Their goal is the same as yours and mine: provide a tried-and-true enticement that brings a long tail of top-of-mind awareness to both current fans and new ones. Bottom line: For me, the name of the game is always to expand my reader base. In doing so, I must also expand my mailing list. Readers are my friends. They want to hear from me. I do what I can to connect and engage with them.”

Further resources

A Google search helped me find some of these resources, which may or may not be what you need. I skimmed each article, but did not read it in-depth. Their inclusion here is not meant to be an endorsement, but rather a jumping off point.

General online contests:

- <https://kickofflabs.com/blog/step-by-step-guide-on-running-successful-contests/>
- <https://www.easypromosapp.com/blog/en/2020/04/social-media-book-giveaway/>
- <https://rafflepress.com/how-to-do-a-book-giveaway/>

Facebook contests:

- <https://blog.hootsuite.com/facebook-contest-rules-tips-ideas/>
- <https://www.postplanner.com/blog/running-a-successful-facebook-contest/>

Goodreads giveaways:

- <https://www.goodreads.com/blog/show/606-how-to-run-a-goodreads-giveaway>

Articles on contest software:

- <https://lumen5.com/learn/contest-software/>
- <https://www.capterra.com/contest-software/>
- <https://www.monsterinsights.com/free-online-contest-software-options-for-viral-giveaways/>
- <https://bloggingwizard.com/social-media-contest-tools/>

Michele Dunaway is a contemporary romance author with over 1.7 million copies sold globally. She’s currently hard at work on her latest series. She was most recently your Nink editor from July 2017 to December 2020.

What Reality TV Taught Me About Writing

By Nicole Evelina



Reality TV has been in our lives since *The Real World* debuted on MTV in 1992, and the genre as we know it really took off in the early 2000s with the success of *Survivor* and *American Idol*.

Up until recently I wasn't much of a reality TV fan. I watched the first season of *The Bachelor* (silly me, I thought it was real) and the first season of *Rock of Love* (I loves me some '80s hair bands). But recently I started watching more shows and it didn't take long for me to realize I was learning a lot about writing by watching these "unscripted" shows. Here are several things I've learned about writing from watching reality TV.

The power of editing

In NINC, we are all experienced professional writers, so I don't have to tell you about how editing can make or break a book. Reality TV is really the best way to see how editing can change a story. Depending on how a scene or episode is edited, an innocent conversation between two friends can be made to look like a cat fight. We need to remember this when we are attacking our own work or working with a professional editor. If an edit changes our original intention, is it worth fighting for your original text? In some cases, yes. In others, that same edit might open your eyes to a whole new possibility for your book you hadn't considered. Also, think about perspective and the way it alters a story. Depending on whose eyes we're seeing a scene through, it could be very different than through someone else's.

Don't rely too strongly on stock characters, but don't forget them either

Raise your hand: who has rooted for "the bitch" or "jerk" character on a reality show? I know I have. If you leave out these fan faves (see also the "good girl," the "BFF," the "anti-hero," etc.) your audience could be disappointed, because they love them. However, if you have too many stock characters and don't give them memorable characteristics, or a definitive voice

and/or a reason for the reader to cheer or jeer, you're going to have a cast of cardboard characters that readers will reject. (See *Million Dollar Listing: Hamptons* for a reality TV example.) The reason we love the bitch and the jerk are that they inspire powerful emotions in us, usually loathing. But the BFF can do that too, especially if they make us want to have them as *our* BFF. When you have beta readers read your book or get ARC reviews back, look at how people are reacting to your characters. If that strong emotional tie is there, you've likely transcended stock status.

The power of branding

Seasons two and three of *Selling Sunset* started to introduce branded elements into the show. The cast began carrying around coffee mugs with the real estate firm's logo. When they did a photo shoot (because everyone does those in real life, right?), they dressed in carefully chosen brand colors—those sitting on the couch were flanked by pillows bearing the company name and logo. But the one that really got me was when they started having Oppenheim Group branded wine at their broker's open houses. Um, who doesn't want their own branded wine? Consider where you can put your logo besides your website, Instagram, etc. If you want fun ideas for swag that sells, check out the September 2020 issue of *Nink* where Linda Gilman leads us through some unique ideas.

Cliffhangers

Reality TV loves nothing more than to hook you and keep you binge-watching. *Big Brother* does this in each episode when the narrator says, "Who will win the power of veto?" or "Who will win Head of Household?" *Big Brother* has such a fan following people sign up to watch "After Dark" so they can get the spoilers before the episodes air. As you plot out the ending to each book in your series, consider if a cliffhanger would work.

Plot twist!

In order to keep viewers interested, every so often reality TV throws a curve ball the contestants (and often the audience) didn't see coming. This one's pretty self-explanatory, but it's *Big Brother's* double eviction and *The Amazing Race's* [Phil Keoghan](#) telling the last team it's a non- eviction round. The key is to surprise your readers, but in such a way that they can look back and see the clues you've been leaving them all along.

We all crave fantasy

Have you ever noticed that reality TV always takes place in glamorous locations like Los Angeles, New York or London, or that the shows jet their contestants/characters off to exotic locales? No one wants to watch actual reality. *Selling Sunset* ups the glam not only by taking place in LA, but by featuring a realty brokerage that only caters to elite clientele. Everyone dresses to the nines, attends really cool parties and tours huge houses. Viewers drool over how the other half lives. No matter where or when your story takes place, what fantasy can your book fulfill for your readers? Romance clearly plays to the human fantasy of falling in love with our ideal mate. Historical fiction takes us back in time and into the minds and hearts of people

we've studied in school. Sci-fi allows us to dream of a better / different future. Even horror and domestic suspense tap into the dark fantasies we may not wish to admit to.

The ensemble matters

For reality shows to spin off, characters must connect with the readers. [Randy Fenoli](#) doesn't even work at Kleinfeld's any longer but *Say Yes to the Dress* can't exist without him (or Monty in *Say Yes to the Dress, Atlanta*). However, some spinoffs can have too much of the same thing (example: any *Real Housewives* or *Vanderpump Rules*). When a character is popular it is because of a characteristic that makes them stand out from the ensemble; however, what most people fail to realize is the ensemble must avoid being "too much." On *Selling Sunset*, over-the-top Christine threw a "Botox and Burgers" buyers open house, and she threw herself a lavish engagement party complete with a live zebra. But without those who temper her, she would be too obnoxious on her own. The same holds for series/books we may write based on secondary characters introduced elsewhere. Make sure you ask yourself how you can provide a foil for that character that will temper them like the original cast did. What will you do to keep their outstanding traits from becoming overkill once they are on their own?

Innovative and controversial = press and popularity

Look no further than *Indian Matchmaking* to try to understand why anyone in the 21st century would still agree to an arranged marriage. On the surface, this seemed innocent enough, but the show also revealed prejudices that run deep in Indian culture, such as a desire for a bride who is not only tall, light-skinned, and thin, but not too outspoken, career-driven or independent. This, naturally, ignited discussion online and resulted in press coverage, which sent even more people to Netflix to see what the big deal was about. Same for why viewers tune in for *Married at First Sight* or *My 600-lb Life*. What these shows reveal is that if we embrace the unusual or controversial in our books, it could lead to viral word of mouth or even media interest, both of which sell books. But we have to be careful because it can also blow up in our faces (because unlike TV, which is designed to incite visually, our books do not have this optical aspect). The innovation has to make sense in the plot and should be treated in a way that doesn't offend anyone.

Be careful of trying to ride others' coattails

You know how when one book is a hit everyone tries to write the next one? Reality TV is the same way. After *Selling Sunset*, Netflix put out a show called *Million Dollar Beach House*. It may be the worst reality show I have ever seen. It was clearly trying to capitalize on *Selling Sunset's* success, with characters who were similar, but not believable, totally forced drama, and arbitrary dips into the cast's personal lives (that I totally didn't care about). The only thing it had going for it was the beautiful Hamptons homes. This shows that just because you have the same formula that worked for another show / author, unless you have the passion for it and take the time to make the story work, it won't necessarily be a hit.

In conclusion

While I still dread calling myself a reality TV fan (but let's face it, I am), I'm glad my brain needed a break because I learned a lot about storytelling by paying attention to what works and what doesn't for me. However, just like with books, what I like, you may hate, and vice versa. But next time you turn on the TV to tune in to your favorite "unscripted" show, take note of what works for you and what doesn't and why. You just might be able to incorporate it into your next book.

Nicole Evelina is taking a break between books. She just finished her first biography and will start a historical fiction book soon. But for now, you can find her watching *The Home Edit* (which she doesn't really like but watches anyway) and not so patiently waiting for the fourth season of *Selling Sunset*.

Step Back In Time

Writing flashbacks

By Joanne Grant



One of the many magical qualities about fiction is the ability to step back and show the reader an exact moment that had a great significance to characters, or the plot, in the present. It's the literary equivalent of a time machine! However, there is some debate about the use of flashbacks. Some feel it is a clumsy way of telling backstory, when this could be shown in the present, while others feel a well-placed flashback can provide much needed context for where the characters are in their current lives as to their conflicts and motivation

As with so much about writing, I would argue that flashbacks are all in the execution. A badly placed or obsolete flashback can frustrate the reader – which is a crime indeed – whereas an effective flashback can enrich the front story, create tension, and compel the reader forward.

Here are some practical tips to avoid being found guilty of some of the most common of flashback crimes.

Crime #1: Flashbacks kill the pace!

If you are going to interrupt the forward momentum of the story by including a flashback—it better be for a good reason. Otherwise you are essentially killing that all-important pace. Here are some practical points to consider when it comes to pacing.

When to include them?

Ideally, do not include a flashback until you have established a brisk pace, ensuring your reader has had time become invested in your story and characters before they are transported back in time. Insert a flashback too soon and you may stop that pace before it's really gotten going.

How long should they be?

The length of a flashback will affect pace—too long and the reader may become impatient, flicking forward to get back to the main story, or too short and they may question whether it was even needed. To keep it just right, ask yourself, is it advancing the plot? Is this necessary to be revealed here? Question whether there is a way to share the same information with the same impact in the front story—if there is, you probably shouldn't be adding it into a flashback. And is it actually engaging to read? You may be using a flashback to convey information but you still need to keep you reader entertained!

How to transition in/out of them?

To keep the pace flowing and smooth, how you transition in and then out of your flashbacks is important—nothings disrupts pace like a clumsy transition between scenes! It is convention to use italics for flashbacks, but this alone is not enough to orientate your reader so ease into scenes as you usually would for scene transitions. You could explicitly spell out how far back the flashback is with time markers such as “six years earlier,” or orientate the reader in a specific period in time such as “it was the Summer of '95.”

Also, think about what your trigger is that logically leads back in time, and similarly the trigger to return back to the present day. If your flashback is directly from a character's point of view, you may want to use a “Proustian moment”—where a physical sensation such as taste or smell triggers a memory—which makes sense of why the character is having this flashback. You can use a similar technique to move the character out of their reminiscence and back to the present.

How many?

Flashbacks can be a great literary device but be mindful about chopping and changing between past and present too frequently, unless this is the convention of your chosen genre. This could cause a start/start feel to your pace. While there is no fixed rule as to how many, what is the purpose of each flashback?

Crime # 2: Flashbacks are boring!

Your reader runs the risk of being bored by your flashback if you get the timing, length and frequency wrong, but what about content? The main accusation thrown at flashbacks is that they do nothing more than tell backstory which isn't interesting to read, especially when it can be shown in the front story in a more engaging way.

So how can you avoid this? First of all, recognize that your flashback scene has to be as engaging as your front story, but it must also serve a specific purpose, one that cannot be achieved any other way. Here are some of the key purposes of flashbacks which are by no means boring!

Character motivation and empathy

A scene that shows character motivation adds a deeper understanding to why characters are behaving how they are in the front story. By showing it in real time, the flashback can also help to create reader empathy towards a character that may not have otherwise been felt. This can be especially impactful if the character has been significantly changed by a past event. It allows the reader the rare insight into who the characters were before their life took them on a different track. Learning this information can be enjoyable as well as illuminating to the reader.

Create tension and foreshadowing

Secrets and foreshadowing in flashbacks create tension that, as a result, can spur the reader forward. There can be delicious tension added to the front story by revealing something significant from the past. For example, providing information to the reader that isn't yet known to a key character or other characters puts the reader in-the-know and compels them eagerly forward to the point of reveal in the front story. Everything you write should propel the reader forward—even if you are going back in time!

Crime #3: Flashbacks don't add anything!

Like everything in your story, flashbacks must add something. If the information conveyed can be included in the front story without disrupting the linear narrative, then why would you add a flashback?

It's all about the emotional core!

There is certainly room for added drama, tension and character development, as already highlighted, but for me, flashbacks pack the biggest punch when they tap into emotion. A well-executed flashback will speak to the emotional core of the story and will link into the character's internal and external conflicts. Flashbacks also can provide an immediacy of emotion that isn't possible any other way.

Ironically, one of the accusations against flashbacks is that they lack immediacy because by definition, the events have happened in the past. However, when done well, you can overcome this. For example, a character can explain how they felt when something happened to them, but show the scene from the past in real-time and the reader then can witness the characters experiencing it first-hand.

This can have true power and impact, especially when what happens is an event that is a key turning point for the character. Seeing this scene can help a reader deepen their empathy and understanding of a motivation and therefore return the reader to the front story with a new and reinvigorated perspective on a character.

So, did you find yourself guilty or not guilty when it came to the flashback crimes? Hopefully you will have thought of new ways to address writing flashbacks, or maybe you are still very much firmly in the 'say no to flashback' camp. Either way, it is a good reminder that when you are utilizing any literary device, especially one with magical powers—approach it with respect, understand its purpose and wield its magic sparingly!

Joanne Grant is an editorial coach with over 16 years of editorial expertise working for the global best-selling publisher Harlequin. Grant has edited hundreds of romance novels over the years and understands how to coach authors of all genres to deliver their best work. If you're interested in finding out how she can help you achieve your writing goals, get in touch—she loves to chat! For inspiration, tips and offers why not sign up to her [newsletter](#), join her Facebook group [Motivation for Writers!](#) or connect on Twitter [@JoanneMGrant](#).

Playing with Possibility Time

The writer as reluctant Sisyphus

By Kelly McClymer



We are all Sisyphus, we writers. Sisyphus, the king who tricked the gods to gain immortality (twice!), endured an eternal punishment fated to roll a boulder up a hill every day, only to have it be at the bottom again the next dawn. The one difference is that we punish ourselves to this eternity.

Don't believe me?

How many books have you written? How many have been easy to write (easy being defined as never hitting a this-book-sucks-and-I-don't-know-where-to-go wall when you sit down to write)?

When I was a new writer, I thought writing would get easier with each book. Makes sense, right? Most things get easier the more you do them. But we writing vets know better. At any writing conference, or gathering of writers, we hear the complaints—how hard it is to get the words written, the stories told, the twists twisted in just the right way.

The complaints boil down to one thing: facing the blank page and filling it is hard work—and as soon as you fill up one page, there's the next...blank again. Sisyphus indeed.

Maybe the complaint chorus should have warned us away. Instead, we decided to make filling the blank page a career. And we started looking for (and sharing) hacks to get the muse to come and help us fill blank page after blank page.

About 20 years in, I was sitting at a NINC Night Owl, listening to tips on how to make yourself write when you don't feel like it. A veteran author said she propped up a bill to remind herself that if the book didn't get finished, she didn't get paid. Made sense to me, so I tried it—and promptly sent myself into a debilitating writer's block.

I had a deadline, so I put the bill away and tried out a few more tips I'd heard in the Night Owl. I don't remember exactly what worked, but I think it was the suggestion to use headphones with creativity white noise playing—something I still do today. But I've never

found a single hack that worked reliably every time (and I once tied myself to a chair in desperation, not a hack I recommend, but I was desperate).

Most of the writers I know write their books this way: engaging in the Sisyphean struggle to roll the motivation rock up the hill each writing session, only to find it at the bottom of the hill again in the morning.

Those of us who teach or coach encourage new writers to do the same. Every day, trick yourself into filling that page by ignoring/blocking the fact that you're going to have to do it many, many, *many* times to finish a book and have a writing career.

What if we have it all wrong?

What if we changed our thinking? Let's take Sisyphus. He's doomed to see the boulder at the bottom of the hill every morning. He can wail and moan. He can suffer. Or he can accept his fate and change his morning thought to: "How can I enjoy pushing this boulder up the hill today?"

That sounds impossible, you say. But think of Olympic athletes, who spend hours a day practicing just one move. That's exactly what they do. For years. And from that rigor, they create new moves, and new combinations of moves.

My podcast, *Hack Your Muse*, encourages writers to create a toolbox of tricks to face the blank page, keeping and using what works for them and their storytelling goals. The idea is the more hacks you have, the more likely you are to find the right one to get that book written, one reluctant writing session at a time.

But the word "reluctant" stood out to me. Why should a writer, who has chosen to write, have to feel reluctant? A quick dip into research on motivation and behavioral analytics offers a clue. Human beings have a brain that wants, above all things, to keep us safe and entertained. It is much "safer," says the brain, to read a book than to write one. What if you write a boring book? What if you are mocked?

My research resulted in a nifty Creative Engine model for what causes blocks, and what hacks might fix a certain block in the engine to get you writing more smoothly. But it did not address the reluctance factor. Even using the Creative Engine, you and your brain were going to be at odds every time you saw the blank page.

The Creative Engine model makes sense of the war going on inside the writer (self-doubt, perfectionism, fear of failure, etc.). But it isn't enough to change the underlying thoughts (i.e. create thoughts that convince your brain it is safe for you to write your book and to stand down and let you dive deep into the story and have at it).

Motivation and behavioral research is very clear: when we are open to possibility, we create. Our brains love probability (falsely believing it keeps us safe). When we get mired in probability, we have to slog through it to fill the page.

Back to the idea that we are all Sisyphus: possibility (my readers are going to love this twist) pulls us forward, up the hill, and probability (I had some harsh reviews last book) lands us back at the bottom of the hill.

Every. Darn. Time.

Worst of all, the thoughts that mire us in probability are mainly subconscious, deeply rooted from childhood, and accepted as truth in a blip of time we don't even notice. Rooting out

those thoughts takes bringing them to the surface and exchanging probability thoughts (readers are fickle and they'll abandon you for the next new thing) for possibility thoughts (it's absolutely possible that my readers are waiting for the next book from me even as I type).

Thus was born a concept that could eradicate reluctance: Possibility Time.

Possibility Time is a simple concept: if you embrace the possible and shut out the probable, you can create without reluctance.

Most of us experienced this when we first started to write, back when anything seemed possible. But rejections, and reviews, and/or poor launches rack up the probabilities for our brain. Every time we reach the blank page, probability flashes through our minds in a time so brief we have to be paying attention to notice.

Possibility time is a simple concept that isn't so easy to implement, at first, because we have to retrain our brains. To retrain our brains we must replace the thoughts that are false (readers are fickle) with those that are true (many readers are loyal and forgiving, even when we disappoint them). Or, if you're a writer who doesn't write for your readers, but for yourself, you might replace the false thought "I've run out of good ideas," with the true thought "good ideas are everywhere and I'm good at finding them."

Retraining the brain means pulling subconscious thoughts up to our conscious and facing them. Research indicates we humans don't like to do that because it causes fear ("You will die!" says the brain). Writers on the other hand, love to deal with human fears. It is the stuff of our creation. You don't have to be Stephen King, or J.K. Rowling to use fear to craft a great story. Even the mildest romance deals with the fear that things won't work out and hearts will be broken.

Which means, while we writers are excellent at inviting fear in to play, we are not so good at limiting those primal truths to our storytelling. If you can dangle your heroine over a rocky ravine from a fraying bungee cord, you can imagine Kirkus (or worse, your readers) reviewing your latest twist in scathing terms.

The (very) few writers you know who don't have to force themselves to write do this. They don't care about the probabilities—while they're writing, at least. They're focused on the possibility of surprising and delighting themselves with the next scene, chapter, twist, revelation.

So why is it so hard for the rest of us?

Back to the nifty Creative Engine model I created: it's because we don't believe in ourselves, our books, our publisher, or our readers. Knowing the deeper reason why your creative engine gums up not only helps to find the hack that will motivate you through, it shows you how to identify and release the probabilities that hold you back.

The down side: who really has time to scour all the probability fear out of our brains? We have books to write.

However, what if we could shut out probability for just one hour? What if we could engage Possibility Time when we sat down to write? Wouldn't that feel great?

Most readers can't read about Sisyphus without wanting to avoid his fate—or they want to rescue him from his relentless burden.

Thanks to the gods, Sisyphus had no choice. His only power is in his attitude. He could decide to enjoy the process. Or pretend to be getting stronger. Something to block out the probability he was never going to escape his fate and allow him to embrace the possibility that he could enjoy the day's journey.

We writers are Sisyphus, and we have the exact same choice. We can sit down at each writing session thinking the probability is that we don't know what we're doing, our work will be terrible, we have no idea what to write next, and we'd be better off with a steady paycheck day job.

Or we can shift the narrative.

Sit down for each writing session, shut probability in the attic, and invite possibility in to play. After all, it is entirely possible that you will write the perfect scene. You know what that feels like. You just need to find that one thought that will reassure your brain it's safe to stand down from probability for one hour.

Unlike Sisyphus, thankfully, we know our work is not undone in the night. Each blank page filled stays filled, and our efforts will create a scene, a chapter, a story, a career. Even if we have to slog through probability to get the book finished, it will exist.

On the other hand, Possibility Time sounds like so much more fun, doesn't it?

Kelly McClymer is a USA Today bestselling author and has published over 20 novels and counting, in three different genres. She founded Hack Your Muse, the podcast and coaching arm, to help other writers write what they want, when they want, and how they want. Because the more a writer listens to her muse, the happier she will be.

The Mad Scribbler

Agents and You, Part 1

By Laura Resnick



“Choose your agent as carefully as you would choose your accountant or lawyer. Or dentist.”

—Russell Banks, writer

Several years ago, I was talking with a successful indie novelist who had recently hired a literary agent. I remember him explaining to me how he wound up choosing her.

He had by then reached a level of success where a number of literary agents were approaching him, hoping to represent him at a time when major publishers were increasingly interested in him.

“But,” he said, “agents who approached me always opened with, ‘The first thing you should know is that I get fifteen percent.’”

He figured if that was their idea of a sales pitch to someone they were trying to persuade to hire them, he definitely didn’t want them representing his work.

This sounded dreadfully familiar to me. I’ve often been surprised by how many literary agents have all the persuasive power one normally expects of small pile of grass cuttings.

By contrast, the agent he wound up hiring was the only one who pitched to him by saying, “Here’s a list of things an agent can do for you, here’s how those things would benefit you, and here’s why you need *me* to do them.”

Now that’s a good pitch.

The author still does more indie work than traditional publishing, and he remains a client of that agent, who handles a wide variety of subrights business for him.

The innovative and evolving indie publishing world has brought about many changes in our lives as writers—including our relationship to agents. After all, the guy who told me that story was such a successful novelist that literary agents were seeking him out and soliciting him, eager to represent him, though he had never sold a book to a publisher. That author still engages in indie publishing, for which his agent gets no commission. This is very different from the publishing world we used to know.

The standard joke about commission used to be, “Look, if I’m in a car accident and get rushed to the hospital for a blood transfusion, my agent gets 15% of the blood.” Indeed, my last agent told me she had to get a commission on everything I did, whether or not she was involved with it (she had recently refused to represent several of my projects), because she just didn’t “feel comfortable working any other way.” (She appeared to be using the word “working” in the unusual sense of: declining to do any work at all.)

But I digress.

For decades, the conventional wisdom among writers was that, with very few exceptions, such as writing category romance for Harlequin/Silhouette (H/S), a writer must have a literary agent. There was no path to readers without a publisher, and you had to have an agent just to get a publisher, let alone to deal regularly with one.

Indeed, there were even many writers who said you should have an agent for dealing with H/S, that the contracts and advances weren’t really non-negotiable, we were just encouraged to believe that so we wouldn’t hire agents.

Well, after writing ten books for H/S many years ago as an unagented writer, I wound up hiring an agent who told me the same thing: it wasn’t true that an agent made no difference there, she could get improvements to my contracts and advances.

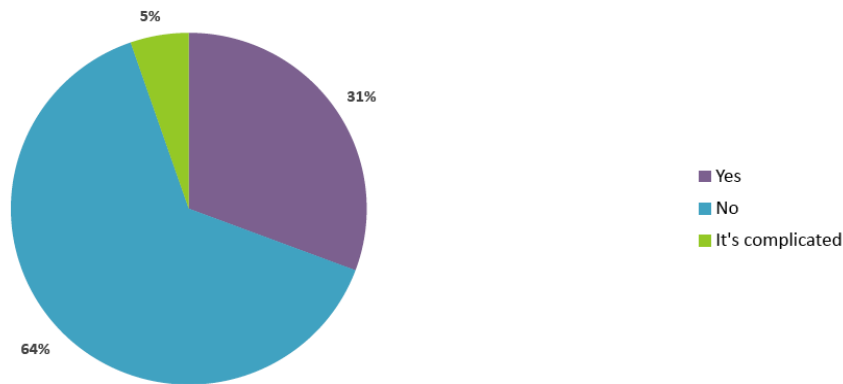
Actually, she couldn’t. When she was done negotiating on my behalf, my contract terms remained 100% identical to my previous contract at H/S. The \$500 raise on my advance I’d gotten for every book was still \$500. The only change I experienced was that I was now making less money than before, due to paying out a 15% commission.

But notwithstanding differences of opinion about whether one needed an agent when dealing with a few specific companies, the universally accepted axiom throughout the industry for generations, among writers and publishers alike, was that a career writer *must* have an agent—a perceived truism that has been turned on its head by changes over the past decade.

And it’s not just that you can have a successful writing career these days without a publisher or agent. The way we engage with agents is evolving, too.

Both of these facts of modern publishing are reflected in this response from NINC members, in the internal survey compiled early last year, to the question: *Do you currently have a literary agent?*

Members Currently Working with a Literary Agent



Keep in mind, NINC consists entirely of multi-published novelists; and, according to the survey, 75 percent of our members are—or have been—traditionally published. Some related statistics reported from the survey: Nearly half of our members have had books appear on national bestseller lists, and nearly half earn 75-100 percent of their income from writing.

This is a very accomplished population of commercial fiction writers. Yet roughly two-thirds of NINC members don't have a literary agent, and others have an agent relationship that's "complicated."

Those figures represent such a sea-change from just a few years ago. I've been asking NINC members to share their current perspectives on the role or non-role of agents in their careers now, and, as usual, members have been responsive.

For a number of NINC members who previously had traditional publishing careers, their needs changed as their careers changed.

USA Today bestselling author [Mindy Klasky](#) says, "I was represented for many years, but about 7 years ago, my agent and I parted ways, mutually agreeing that with my primarily-indie career, there wasn't much either of us could do with the other. We've maintained a civil relationship and check up with each other when we see a news article or similar reminder of work we shared."

Barbara Keiler, a past-president of NINC, has written more than 100 novels under the pen name [Judith Arnold](#), released by half a dozen publishing houses. "I've had three agents in my career," she reports. "One long-term agent (20+ years), who took my career up to a certain level but couldn't get me to the next level (we parted amicably), and two short-term agents who were never able to sell any of my work. It became clear that major publishers did not want to work with me, and their antipathy toward me grew even stronger after I became one of the named plaintiffs in the Harlequin [class-action lawsuit](#). I accepted that I would go fully indie and no longer have anything to do with publishers and agents."

However, since then, Keiler has returned to traditional publishing, in what she hopes will be a long-term partnership, with [The Story Plant](#), an independent publishing house.

"I do not need an agent for this," Keiler says. "I can handle my own contract negotiations. If I wanted to sell to one of the big publishers, I'd need an agent, but I don't want to. I don't want to be a small fish in a big pond, answerable to layers of editors who want to reshape my manuscripts to accommodate their visions rather than mine. I feel quite comfortable and well understood at the Story Plant, and I have no interest in publishing elsewhere. Ergo, no need for an agent."

Another NINC member, who prefers not to be named, has also had three agents. The first one sold the author's first book, "but was not very proactive about the contract terms or assisting me in dealing with the publisher. So I let her go." The next agent sold three of the author's books and was excellent—supportive, efficient, and proactive. "But he also worked exclusively in a niche market, and when I left that market, we agreed to part ways." The third agent never made a sale and eventually dropped the author, who says, "After that experience, I decided to give up on traditional publishing and just do indie. So I didn't feel like it would be worth anyone's time for me to try to get a new agent. Traditional publishing burned me pretty badly with my fourth (and last) trad book, and then after waiting a year and a half for a sale that never came, I just didn't feel like beating my head on that wall anymore."

This author concludes, "I 'came of age' publishing-wise when having an agent was a huge mark of validation and a sign that I was a 'professional.' That feeling of status is reassuring to have when my career is otherwise floundering. But I know that none of that is a good reason to get an agent. And I don't want to encourage—in myself or anyone else—this idea that we writers need to have validation from other parts of the industry to be legitimate... It's also very nice to not have to turn over that 15% of my writing income to someone who, in many cases, has not been the publishing partner the agenting industry purports itself to be."

[Jennifer Stevenson](#), author of humorous fantasy and romance, made her first book sale on her own. She was able to use that offer to attract a well-known agent. However, the agent "seemed offended" that the author, who had educated herself about the business, read the publisher's contract and expected the agent to negotiate improvements to bad clauses, such as basket accounting, a too-broad option clause, and poorly-defined e-royalty terms.

"He never read anything I sent him and never got me a contract offer that I hadn't brought him," Stevenson reports. "He negotiated those contracts, and I got paid. When my publisher dropped me, he dropped me, without, of course, admitting it."

Stevenson adds, "I had two other agents, less useful even than this guy." Like many other writers, she turned to indie publishing. "My situation is a little different from most indies. Since the day I first got published, I've also belonged to [an author-owned publishing cooperative](#), so I never had to face the steep learning curve of the indie publishing slope all by myself.

"I still feel I could make my way through a [New York publishing] contract as successfully as an agent could, and I have had no reason to feel confident that an agent could get me a better deal. Moreover, the NY contracts my midlist trad writer friends are getting are so unfavorable, and the money is so bad, that I am happy to trade my poor sales and the indie struggle for my freedom."

But what about the one-third of NINC members who *do* have an agent? Or NINC members who say “it’s complicated?” And, indeed, members who don’t have an agent but want one? We’ll explore those questions next month in Part 2 of “Agents and You.”

Laura Resnick, who gave up on literary agents after her fourth one, writes fiction, nonfiction, and short fiction.

Membership Benefits

Need industry intel, software, or legal help? We've got you covered.

Are you taking advantage of all your member benefits?

As a NINC member, your benefits include industry discounts, newsletter and website articles, professional services directory, networking opportunities, and more.

We've compiled all of these—which you can also find on our website—into this list as a helpful reminder.

Networking

The email list for Novelists, Inc. Members: <https://groups.io/g/NINCLINK>

Join our Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/NovelistsInc/>

We offer a critique/brainstorming group: <https://groups.io/g/NINKcritique>

Follow NINC on Twitter: https://twitter.com/Novelists_Inc

Conference:

Conference information: <https://ninc.com/conferences/about-the-ninc-conference/>

Newsletter

Propose an article: <https://ninc.com/newsletter/propose-an-article/>

Submit a letter to the editor: <https://ninc.com/newsletter/submit-letter-to-editor/>

Newsletter archives: <https://ninc.com/newsletter/news-archive/>

Website (you must be logged in to access these services)

Legal Fund: <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/legal-fund/>

Pro Services Directory: <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/pro-services-directory/>

Sample Letters: <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/sample-letters/>

Articles & Links: <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/articles-and-links/>

Welcome Packet: *A link to the new member packet will be included as soon as it's been updated.*

Member discounts

NINC members are eligible for certain professional discounts. A complete listing of these can be found at <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/member-freebies-discounts/> along with other member discounts.

Volunteer

One of the greatest benefits of NINC is the opportunity to volunteer your talents to benefit other members—which pays incredible and unexpected dividends in networking and knowledge. Learn more about volunteer opportunities here: <https://ninc.com/members-only/open-positions/>

Open positions include:

- Social Media Committee
- Tweet Team
- Recruiting New Members
- Anything!



Founded in 1989

NINC Statement of Principle

Novelists, Inc., in acknowledgment of the crucial creative contributions novelists make to society, asserts the right of novelists to be treated with dignity and in good faith; to be recognized as the sole owners of their literary creations; to be fairly compensated for their creations when other entities are profiting from those creations; and to be accorded the respect and support of the society they serve.

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- Rebecca Brandewyne
- Janice Young Brooks
- Jasmine Cresswell
- Maggie Osborne
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