

How to Write a Blockbuster Novel



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What is a Blockbuster?

A bestseller - blockbuster - is a book that exceeds all expectations. Many things go into creating a blockbuster novel, not all of the author's doing. As editors explain, sometimes skillful marketing is the key factor, sometimes it's the packaging, frequently it's timing, topic or setting to which success is due.

So where does the writer come into it? Well, according to some major publishers, the actual writing is secondary to most of those things listed above; to others writing is the only thing that really counts.

To the writer the only thing that really matters is the experience of writing a blockbuster novel as you will shortly discover.

The Financial Rewards

Some blockbuster authors command fantastic fees for their writing, sometimes before putting pen to paper. John Grisham, for instance, author of 'The Firm', 'The Pelican Brief' and 'The Client', recently received a \$2.3 million dollar advance for 'The Chamber', a story about the oldest man on Death Row. More surprising still, Grisham hadn't even started work on the novel before movie companies began fighting for it. Subsequently, his first novel 'A Time to Kill', rejected by 16 agents and 28 publishers, made movie history with the highest record for picture rights of \$2.6 million.

What Publishers Say

The following are recent quotes from interviews in mainstream writing magazines:

'We want that indefinable thing, first rate story-telling. The commonest mistake authors make is to tell you things rather than showing you'.

'We're looking for someone with an extraordinary story to tell or a new voice. Above all writing has to flow'.

'The best way of getting noticed is to get an agent. That helps the publisher because at least someone has already sifted through once and thinks it worth pushing.'

'A real bestseller isn't formulaic. It has something special or different about it, a strong story line and characters'.

'In women's fiction it's got to be original and unique. Read something that's selling and give the theme a fresh feel. But don't try anything too formulaic'.

I don't believe in formula bestsellers. I'm looking for a well-written, original manuscript.'

'The main thing is to be original and avoid cliches like the designer label novel with glitzy settings

'I'm looking for strong contemporary fiction with a good narrative pull.'

What Writers Say

‘The most important advice I can give is to DO it. People say, ‘I’m sure I could write a bestseller if only I had the time’. The point is that it’s no good waiting for inspiration’. Sally Beauman.

‘The only criterion for a bestseller is how many people actually read it. All my stories can be told in one sentence. For example ‘Kane and Abel’ is the story of two men born on the same day who only meet once in their lives. If you can’t tell it in one sentence, you’re a writer not a storyteller.’ Jeffrey Archer.

‘Only write because you want to.’ Philippa Gregory.

‘Publishers say there are six genres (romance, horror, thrillers, historical novels, science fiction, fantasy), so study your field. Pick a good example, then write your own, not forgetting emotion. It must be honest, and the first chapter should contain some hook.’ Pamela Townley.

‘You have to set out to write a good novel. My main advice to aspiring authors is to practise. I believe that people can only learn to write by actually writing, not by talking about it.’ P D James.

‘I’m like a psychiatrist. I try to analyse people, thinking about how they’d behave. I do a breakdown of character on postcards then refer back. Of course they change and grow.’ Barbara Taylor Bradford.

‘There’s a very simple formula – it’s work!’ Catherine Cookson.

‘But characters are the most important thing. In ‘Rockstar’, my latest novel, I start with the character Kris. I wrote his life, not knowing what would happen next otherwise I’d get bored. I do a lot of research. Before writing ‘Rockstar’, I read about 30 - 40 books. I like to steep myself in the subject, just think my way into it. I also went out on the road with a heavy metal rock group - it was quite an experience!’ Jackie Collins.

Ingredients for a Blockbuster Novel

- Keep the reader on edge, keep him turning the pages until the very end. In short, make yours a book he can’t put down.

John Grisham, master of suspense, quoted in ‘Writers’ Monthly’: ‘It’s (his writing) a deliberate effort to make the pages turn. I want people to lose sleep when they read them. I want people to skip work, to call in sick.’

Saying much the same thing, Sidney Sheldon tells us: ‘What I’m doing now is to make people happy - writing books deliberately constructed so that when you get to the end of the chapter you’ve got to turn one more page. I love that kind of book, and I know my readers do, too.’

- Start with a bang, on the first page if possible. Grip the reader with conflict, trouble, fear, violence. Don’t worry about explaining it yet.

- Make life tough for the main characters.
- Give your characters a stake in the novel. In his recent article, 'Blueprint for a Blockbuster', published in *Writer's Yearbook*, leading US editor/publisher Albert Zuckerman tells us: 'In many major women's novels, the principal stake is not life or death but personal fulfilment, as with Scarlett in 'Gone With the Wind' and Meggie in 'The Thorn Birds'.
- Make things look hopeless and avoid easy solutions.
- Create conflict. All good writing focuses on conflict: unrequited love, war, crime, oppression, poverty. In a recent article in 'Writer's Yearbook', we hear that 'The best story is usually that in which the protagonist (main character) takes active steps to achieve a goal against impossible odds, or to prevent opposing forces from overcoming him or his loved ones'.
- Put your main character or his aims in jeopardy. Bestselling author Brian Garfield, writing in a leading American writers' yearbook tells us (of the main character): 'His own life or those of his loved ones should be in danger. Whatever the conflict is, if he loses, it's going to cost him horribly; that's the essence.'
- Give the protagonist (main character) a tight time limit, and then shorten it. Because: 'When time is a factor, and when the brief span of time in which the hero must resolve the conflict is then shortened, you have gone a long way toward heightening the suspense.' Brian Garfield.
- Don't rush in where angels fear to tread. 'I mean that it is wise to observe not only what the pros do, but also what they avoid doing. The best writers do not jump on bandwagons; they build new ones'. The question is, he says, whether the idea for a new novel is 'strong enough and important enough to make the story sufficiently different from its predecessors to merit publication'. Brian Garfield.

Prepare Yourself for a Blockbuster Novel

Turn to any good book about novel writing, ask anyone who's already written one, and a number of recommendations and pointers will emerge:

About You

- Only write because you want to. If it's forced, this will show in your work and, although there have been some exceptions, writers under stress rarely create winning novels.
- Enjoy yourself. In a recent interview for a leading writers' magazine, Sidney Sheldon confides that the reason for his success is simply that he loves writing!
- Don't write anything you wouldn't want to read. In other words, don't try to write a blockbuster just because the particular genre is currently in vogue. If you don't like romantic fiction, but you insist on working to this genre, your dislike will probably show through in your writing and you are unlikely to have much success.

- Try to be natural. Critics can tell if a novel is the work of a natural storyteller or someone trying to write a best seller. This isn't to suggest that concocted best sellers don't have a place on the booksellers' shelves, just that they are few and far between, like Shirley Conran's 'Lace' and Sally Beauman's 'Destiny'.
- Be original. Some of the world's greatest writers have never been taught to write. For some this is deliberate, like Shirley Conran who says: 'Nobody has ever taught me how to write books and I was very careful not to find out because my one chance of writing an international novel lay in originality. If I tried to find out how to do it, then it would not be original.'
- Organise your days and nights so you write when you are at your best. For some people this is early in the morning, for others it's late at night. Some writers need total peace and quiet. Others work better with children, music and pets playing in the background. Most importantly, don't work when you are tired, unwell or unhappy. Your work will suffer and will most likely have to be rewritten.

About Your Readers - And Publisher!

- Understand what readers and publishers really want. According to Shirley Conran: 'When planning a book you have to think of what will be of interest to the general public in three years time.'
- Remember you are writing for today's readers. If your novel has a historical setting, make sure readers can understand dialogue and descriptions used in your work. As an example, words used in the 60s, such as 'groovy' and 'fab' have little relevance for young people today.
- Get to know your prospective readers. Learn all you can about your target audience. In 'Rockstar', for instance, Jackie Collins spent a great deal of time learning about the music industry before setting pen to paper.

Before You Start Writing

- Look for killer plots in real-life situations. Someone who achieves this very nicely, Lynda La Plante tells us: 'If a story captures my mind and my imagination, I will go for it'. 'Cold Shoulder', for example, is the story of an ex-police officer who approached Ms. La Plante with a storyline, based on her own experience as a high-ranking officer who turned to alcoholism. Through drinking she lost her family and her job and eventually turned to prostitution. Her story became the theme for Ms. La Plante's blockbuster.

Kathleen Rowntree, author of 'The Quiet War of Rebecca Sheldon' and 'Tell Mrs. Poole I'm Sorry' bases most of her work on familiar people and settings. Her first novel drew heavily on family history and the second related the life stories of women Ms. Rowntree knows well.

For lawyer/blockbuster author John Grisham, the inspiration for his first novel came from a trial in which a young girl testified against the man who had raped her. Grisham played around with the main characters and facts, and eventually became so obsessed with the story, I thought of little else for three months. I had to write it down.'

- Learn all you can about people, how they think, what they say. This helps you create believable characters.
- Read a lot, particularly blockbuster novels. According to John Grisham: ‘When I was learning the craft, I set out to read all the big-selling commercial novels to see how it should be done. I’ve never set out to produce great literature but I knew I could do better. It was inspiring.’
- Notice what kind of novels are currently in vogue, focusing on genre, length, style. Look at what book clubs are currently offering. To illustrate, the editor’s choice in a recent ‘Worldbooks’ catalogue comprises Sidney Sheldon’s ‘Nothing Lasts Forever’ and Robin Cook’s ‘Fatal Cure’. Doctors, hospitals and suspicious deaths are the shared theme.

About Writing Your Blockbuster

- Don’t throw everything you have into your first novel. Keep something back for a possible sequel!
- Don’t write about things you don’t understand or don’t believe in. Publishers, and readers, will see right through you.
- Decide what narration is best for your novel: first person or third. Be aware of the advantages and limitations of each.
- Make sure everything deserves its place in your novel: characters, events, dialogue, scenes. If in doubt, cut it out!
- Choose names that are exactly right for your characters. Look at a few recent romantic novels, for instance, where you’ll find heroes called Brett or Garnet or Morgan, but you’ll rarely find a Billy, Jimbo or Cedric!
- Remember that characters have histories too and it isn’t enough to present them as they are today. Many top novelists recommend compiling personal histories for each of your main characters, including all personal characteristics and relevant dates and events of each person’s life. Shirley Conran is reported to have compiled a complex family tree going back many years for one of her bestselling novels.
- Check everything you write. Check facts, dates, spelling, meaning of words, descriptions, etc. Arguably, you will get away with one or two minor inaccuracies. One very popular writer reports that in one of his best novels, his main character changes the colour of his eyes part way through the story! And no-one seems to have noticed!
- Don’t let your story become stale. Keep the pace going throughout. Drop hints, make suggestions about future events. Keep the reader interested. Keep him reading!
- Don’t worry about a title for your novel. This can come later. For the time being, give it a working title, something to focus on. Chances are, your publisher will decide the title anyway.
- Don’t worry about your opening sentence. Many great writers leave the opening of their novels until the end.

- Don't ruin your chances with bad grammar or spelling. Treat yourself to copies of Fowler's 'Modern English Usage' and a good dictionary.
- Submit your manuscript to a suitable publisher and address that person by name. For publishers major taboos include: getting the name wrong or, worse still, addressing your manuscript to 'Dear Sir' when over 70 percent of publishers are women!
- Get yourself an agent. This isn't easy for newcomers but it can save a great deal of time and frustration for you. Look in 'Writers' and Artists' Yearbook' or 'Writer's Handbook' for agents who handle novels similar to yours. A short selection is included at the end of this booklet.

Above All

- Believe in yourself. John Grisham tells us he would clip and keep articles on writing as he taught himself the basics. He would turn to his files time and time again for inspiration. But what helped him most of all, he says, was the belief he could write as well as some published novelists.
- Don't give up. Frederic Forsyth's 'Day of the Jackal' was rejected 20 times before finding a publisher, and Catherine Cookson was once advised to look for another career - writing was not for her!
- When you finish one book, start work immediately on the next. Writers who worry too much about work in progress rarely give their best.
- Remember it's never too late. Many blockbusters have been written by first-time novelists fairly late in life. A recent finalist in the W H Smith Fresh Talent promotion, Joyce Windsor, was almost seventy when she penned 'A Mislaidd Magic', described as the senior editor of publishers Black Swan as 'Fantastic an enchanting fresh voice, written by a talent comparable to Nancy Mitford. I had not read anything like it in a long time.'
- **And most important of all, remember that great writing is a question of sitting down and getting on with it!**