

THRILLS, CHILLS, & WRITING SKILLS

TIPS AND TRICKS FROM
NEW YORK TIMES—BESTSELLING AUTHOR
A P R I L H E N R Y

THRILLSCHILLSANDWRITINGSKILLS.COM

10 TIPS IF YOU WANT TO BE A WRITER

1. Read, read, read. The more you read, the more you are absorbing how to write. You can put something aside if it's not working for you—but first try to figure out why it's not working. And for me, the first step in writing a book is reading about the topics I need to understand to make the book accurate.
2. You don't have to write what you know. Write what interests you (and then do the research to get it right). Do I have personal experience with kidnapping, murders, drug dealers, being blind, assuming a dead girl's identity? No. But I've written books about these things that have gotten starred reviews, awards, and have hit the *New York Times* bestseller list.
3. Make writing a habit. Don't wait for inspiration. Once you're published, you'll need to make deadlines. Write every day, or every weekend. If you don't know what to write about, keep a journal (hint: it doesn't even have to be 100% true), or Google "writing prompts."
4. You don't have to outline—but you can. If you don't plot in advance, just keep raising the stakes for your characters. Set up their initial goals, throw some obstacles in the way, and see if your characters sink or swim. And if they do swim, send a few sharks after them!
5. Go to bookstore readings. You'll learn something from every writer you hear. You'll see that published writers aren't some exotic species. And they'll be glad to see you even if you don't buy a book.
6. Don't spend a lot of time setting the stage. Instead, start with something puzzling, mysterious, scary, new, interesting. Start with the day everything changed.
7. Steal from yourself. What have you experienced? Do you know how to macrame, or did you grow up in a fundamentalist family? Try setting your story in a place you know well. It's easy to think of sensory details when the actual place is close at hand.
8. Don't tell us the character is mad, happy, scared, etc. Show us the emotions by how they act. TV shows can't tell you anything. How do you know when a character is happy, sad, angry, frustrated, etc.? Watch TV and write down what you see, the faces characters make, the way they hold their bodies, how they gesture. Then use these things to describe your own characters.
9. Tenacity is as important as talent. I was not the best writer in my classes. But I refused to give up.
10. You can always make bad writing better. You can't improve nothing. Good writing = rewriting. Reading it aloud helps a lot.

10 TIPS FOR WRITING MYSTERIES AND THRILLERS

1. Grab them by the throat with a dramatic beginning. From *The Girl I Used to Be*: “The only sound I can hear is my own panicked breathing. I’m running flat out through the forest. Then my toe catches a root, and suddenly I’m flying.”
2. Create a ticking clock. A literal bomb, a deadline (after which the hostage dies), the day the asteroid is going to crash into earth, an upcoming prom but no date, etc.
3. Write the slow things fast and the fast things slow. Think about a movie. Does the heroine run to open the door of the attic where she thinks the bad guy is hiding? No. She creeps towards it, hesitates, fumbles—all while the audience has their hearts in their throats.
4. Raise the stakes. Our main character was already nervous about singing in class, but now she has been asked to sing at the stadium. Or for a more mystery-related example, not only will someone die if our main character doesn’t catch the serial killer, but the next victim could be his girlfriend.
5. Give each of your characters a dirty little secret and see what they do to keep it a secret.
6. Create kick-butt chapter endings. They should look ahead, not behind. Chapter endings need to end on a note of drama (and, if possible, a cliffhanger) rather than simply summing up what has just taken place. For example, Chapter 12 in *Girl, Stolen* ends this way: “‘Well, well, well, what have we here?’ Jimbo said. ‘How come you don’t have her tied up?’”
7. Keep it snappy. Short chapters tempt readers to read “just one more,” and before they know it, it’s two in the morning.
8. Hurt a main character. It was already going to be difficult to escape, but now that your heroine has a blinding migraine headache, bullet wound, or dislocated shoulder, how will she pull it off? Make your main characters suffer and readers will thank you for it. For even more dramatic tension, kill someone off—preferably a likable character. Otherwise, readers might start believing that you would never let anything bad happen to your main characters.
9. Drop a hint. Mention the locked gun cabinet or even the razor-sharp Wustof knives, and readers will eagerly wait for your resourceful main character to put the object into play.
10. One last twist. Your hero is finally out of danger and readers can let out a sigh of relief. Or can they? Now’s the time for one final twist. It may be a cliché to have the supposedly dead villain pose one last threat – but sometimes clichés work. Don’t let your main character win too easily. The more hopeless it seems, the more readers will be engaged.

CHARACTER

Write one paragraph about your main character. Focus on what they want, what they need (often not the same thing), what they're afraid of (heights, dogs, love?), what's important to them, and what special skills or interests they have (which could come in handy later). All these things will drive the story.

STORY STARTER OR PLOTTING ACTIVITY

THE PLOT OF EVERY STORY

This is a story about _____ (main character) who wants _____ (story goal) more than anything in the world, but is prevented by _____ (obstacle). Every single thing they try fails or even makes things worse, until finally they _____ (does something to overcome obstacle).

Or another way to look at plot:

Once upon a time there was _____. Every day, _____. One day, _____.
Because of that, _____. Because of that, _____. Until finally, _____.

If it's a mystery, the story goal is usually finding who committed the crime: the thief, the blackmailer, the killer. If it's a thriller, the story goal is usually to escape/survive.

So where do you get story ideas? They're all around us! News stories, photos, ads, overheard conversations, a movie, a dream, TV shows—any of these can make you start thinking, “What if?” Even music lyrics can spark a story. *The Girl Who Was Supposed to Die* was inspired by a Kathleen Edwards song.

STORY STARTERS

Maybe you already know what you want to write about. But what if you don't? Try one of these ideas:

- Your best friend has disappeared. And when you search their room or locker, you find a note that says, "If you're reading this, then I am probably dead."
- At night, someone has been leaving old porcelain dolls on porches. And each doll looks uncannily like the young girl who lives in that house.
- Your cat likes to drag things home—usually a glove or a single flip flop. But today it's a bloody T-shirt.
- Your best friend was killed by a drunk driver, who got off with a slap on the wrist. At least until you decide to take matters into your own hands.

Or mix and match ideas. Take one each from Columns A, B and C.

COLUMN A

- A popular cheerleader,
- An obsessive-compulsive loner,
- A fallen angel,
- A high school senior about to flunk out,
- An avid Dungeons and Dragons player,
- A fifteen-year-old boy who is 7 foot 3,
- A budding hip hop artist,
- A rookie policewoman,
- A well-dressed serial killer,
- A broke Uber driver,
- The class misfit,
- A shy babysitter,
- A dogged arson investigator,
- A teenaged Amish girl,
- A former child star who thinks they're still famous,
- A bored security guard,
- An alien trying to pass as human,
- A desperate heroin addict,
- A retired hitman,
- A driven gymnast,
- A shy mama's boy,
- secretly working undercover,

COLUMN B

- while searching for their lost dog,
- ignoring their friends' advice,
- suffering from amnesia,
- while babysitting,
- while working on an unusual homework assignment,
- after being offered a full-ride scholarship,
- after their parents lose their jobs and house,
- after an accident,
- hoping to impress the cute new neighbor,
- having set in motion an ill-advised prank,
- as an incurable plague kills nearly everyone,
- after breaking a promise,
- after losing their best friend,
- on their birthday,
- after winning a bet,
- with only a week to live,
- on the run from the FBI,
- after moving to a tiny town,
- after being fired from their job at McDonalds,
- after escaping from a correctional facility,
- assumes a new identity.

COLUMN C

- steals a package and gets more than they bargained for.
- discovers a plot to kill the president.
- gets an important phone call.
- develops superhuman powers.
- wakes up after a party to find one of the guests murdered.
- gets set up on a blind date.
- finds out they have a long-lost twin.
- gets invited on their favorite reality show.
- becomes an accidental hero.
- refuses to leave his room.
- starts to see ghosts.
- is followed by documentary filmmakers.
- uncovers a long-hidden family secret.
- is kidnapped.
- realizes they don't know their own name.
- is being stalked by an unknown person.
- finds a blackmail note meant for someone else.
- learns about a secret cult.
- becomes intrigued by a ten-year-old murder.
- across a crowded place, sees a person they know died two years ago.