

Royce's Tip for PNWA 2016

“Take a Month to Save a Year”

Introduction (15 min)

Who am I?

Thank you PowerPoint!

Who are you?

What do you want to learn today?

Who is in the middle of a project?

Who knows what story they want to write next?

My bits of advice are “Tools not Rules”

These tools are designed to help save you a year of your life.

Passion (10 min)

Hobby, avocation, or vocation?

You can start (and usually must) at “hobby” and work up.

All three are OK as final goals. I've been at each of these stages!

This should be fun. Try not to binge and burn out.

This can make you money. But don't do it for the money.

If it naturally progresses to an obsessive vocation...great!

Determining your goal level can help direct your habits, time commitment.

And vice versa – your habits can tell you how serious you really are. And that's OK!

Good Habits (15 min)

Fifteen minutes a day can save you weeks of panic and frustration.

If you brush your teeth, you can write each day.

Write every day. Try for 1 page. Just one! More if you're inspired.

What level of commitment?

You will work up to more, just like physical exercise. I try for 2 pages per day.

Declare your intentions. Social media. Post your progress. Commit. Try not to over-commit. Like exercise!

Share your work. Make this a habit.

***Exercise.**

Other good habits you can share with the class?

Make a list of your top 5.

Share the best 2.

Ideas (20 min)

Here is where you can “take a month to save yourself a year.”

Where do ideas come from? Everywhere!

How many ideas does a writer have? Infinity plus one!

Is the idea good?

Are they all good? No!

Can we write them all? If we're writers...yes!

Should we write them all? No.

If I write what I love, the audience will love it, right?

No. This is a common fallacy.

C'mon Royce, if I love it, there will be *some* audience for it, right?

Not necessarily. And publishers don't want “some” audience.

They want a broad audience OR a reliable niche.

Real question: can we write the story both we and our audience love?

Ask yourself: “Do I have just one idea?”

If you're an expert or have a unique experience, then maybe. And that's OK!

Otherwise, get to know your idea for a couple months, at least, before you commit to spending a year living with it.

(hint: It's like dating)

You might get tired of it. It might fade. If so, its wasn't meant to be. So don't commit on the first date!

John Cleese is more famous than me—and he says that “your first idea is usually rubbish.”

What he means is that it will probably be cliché and unsurprising.

That's okay! Just mull it over until you think of a more unique angle on it.

He preaches “patience” and says that's why he's a better writer than some others in the Monty Python crowd.

How to test ideas.

Summarize them. Compare with other ideas for a month at least. Try them on people!

Party example – I used to tell people my ideas were movies.

***Exercise**

1. Everyone create 3 ideas – one sentence. They *can* be a WIP. Just the concept. No conclusion, yet. (10 minutes)
2. Secretly note your favorite.
3. Trade with someone. Have that person mark their favorite of the three.
4. Compare.
5. We all vote the most popular of your three.
6. Which one is the most popular in the room? We vote (we do what the market does). The winner is our primary example for the rest of the day.

Plot (15 min)

Conflict (or “challenge”).

I prefer “challenge” these days, because it is less negative (which is a double negative ☺).

***Exercise.**

Explain the conflict in your most popular idea.

Name three challenges this presents for your character.

Which is the primary challenge?

Research (15 min)

Subject. If you're an expert, great. If not, become one before you write.

Diseases. Laws. Locations. Occupations.

Details. This one gets neglected...even by me!

How guns work. Clothes—pants or skinny jeans?

Always include lots of detail? Not if it interrupts the flow. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar (this is an adult joke!).

***Exercise.**

Can't do research here, you say? Nonsense!

Create a sentence with one or more details that you know nothing about.

Now, who knows more about that topic? What do you know? Let's incorporate that and add a sprinkle of expertise.

Better?

Teach Something (10 min)

Readers (and the agent/editor/librarian/bookstore gatekeepers) want to learn. It's true!

Teaching is related to research.

You are probably already an expert at some aspect of your story.

An expert is (legal definition):

Rule 702. Testimony by Expert**Witnesses**

A witness who is qualified as an expert by knowledge, skill, experience, training, or education may testify in the form of an opinion or otherwise if:

(a) the expert's scientific, technical, or other specialized knowledge will help the trier of fact to understand the evidence or to determine a fact in issue;

(b-d)...

***Exercise.**

What is a topic in your story you know a lot about?

Share how you would teach the audience this topic through your story.

Beginnings (20 min)

First Line

Tell us something about your character.

Give us intrigue. A question.

Just like with ideas, don't get stuck on one, especially the first one.

***Exercise.**

Write 3 great first lines for your most popular story.

This is FUN! So fun that I'll do this one with you for my novel *Princess Assassin*, because I need your help and I'm not happy with my first line, which reads:

Too much blood! Thick streams of red poured from the staggering horse merchant's heels, so much that he planted three full crimson footprints on the livery stable's wide-plank floor before he toppled over and began to drag himself away from her dripping double-edged stabber.

Characters (20 min)

Primary characters.

What is their external conflict?

What is their internal conflict?

How do they each advance the plot?

***Exercises.**

1. Everyone make up another secondary character for our top story.

How does that character's action advance our plot?

2. List 7 traits/descriptors/habits/etc. of the character from your own story.

Now cross out 4 of them.

What is left? Does it describe them well?

Dialogue (20 min)

I like what author HOLLY LISLE says:

“dialogue in a story is NOT about two people talking. That’s what it is, but that’s not what it’s about. Dialogue is about demonstrating character through conflict, either internal or external.” Keep to the conflict.

***Exercise**

Write dialogue for two of our characters. Be sure to have an internal and external conflict.

Twists (5 min)

Create these.

Kids love them (and, again, so do adults).

Get your character into trouble without knowing how they'll get out (in your synopsis, not your drafts).

Try the opposite of your first idea.

If you immediately think of a bald male villain, instead give him hair to his waist.

Outline – No...synopsis (15 min)

H.P. Lovecraft – “How to.”

1. **Prepare a synopsis or scenario of events in the order of their absolute *occurrence*—not the order of their narrations.**

This is a practice adhered to by writers from [J.K. Rowling](#) and [William Faulkner](#) to [Norman Mailer](#). It seems a an excellent general piece of advice for any kind of fiction.

2. **Prepare a second synopsis or scenario of events—this one in order of *narration* (not actual occurrence), with ample fullness and detail, and with notes as to changing perspective, stresses, and climax.**

3. **Write out the story—rapidly, fluently, and not too critically—following the *second* or narrative-order synopsis. Change incidents and plot whenever the developing process seems to suggest such change, never being bound by any previous design.**

It may be that the second rule is made just to be broken, but it provides the weird fiction practitioner with a beginning. The third stage here brings us back to a process every writer on writing, such as [Stephen King](#), will highlight as key—free, unfettered drafting, followed by...

4. **Revise the entire text, paying attention to vocabulary, syntax, rhythm of prose, proportioning of parts, niceties of tone, grace and convincingness of transitions...**

And finally....

5. **Prepare a neatly typed copy—not hesitating to add final revisory touches where they seem in order.**

An alternative to an outline is a synopsis.

Example – Bully School / Magic Crayon / etc.

***Exercise.**

Take your sentence and write one paragraph. (10 minutes)

Conflict.

Action taken to address the conflict.

Result.

Editing (10 min)

This is minimized by outlining or a good synopsis.

Use it to strengthen images.

Eliminate passive voice. Later you can slowly reintroduce passive voice if using it to speed pace.

Swap lines to the characters who should say them.

Ex. Give the defeatist character the defeatist lines.

Writers' Block (5 min)

Go back and edit.

Try the opposite choice for your character.

Get your character into trouble without knowing the answer.

***Exercise**

Take a plot point in our story and have our character make a different choice.

Kid Rules (20 min)

Some rules specific to children's writing.

Content.

Middle Grade

No drugs or sex. Some violence okay. Surprising? No guns.

Young Adult

Drug use okay.

Implied sex okay.

Violence okay.

But...must they be politically correct?

Probably, if you want to get past the gatekeepers.

Technique.

Brevity - Kids have a shorter attention span. Less endurance.

Pace

Work on this in your synopsis/outline.

Descriptions.

Important, but secondary to plot and pace.

Brighter, simpler.

Word choice.

How do we do this without dumbing things down?

Think of yourself as a teacher. Use words they know to give context to words they don't and/or to teach them complex concepts.

Hide the ball (all kids like hiding games).

Create mystery.

Don't preach.

Put your lesson in the background. Once your lesson/point/philosophy/etc. is integral to your story and in your plot/outline, don't mention it again—just tell the story and it will emerge naturally.

***Exercise. (10 min)**

Which of the following is the best balance of description and pace?

How important is our description of the garage? Does it play a plot role?

Which have kid-friendly content?

Middle grade?

Young adult?

Younger?

Samples from James Patterson's writing class:

SAMPLE 1 Galvanized steel pipes ribbed its ceiling, between veins of frayed cable and concrete columns that crumbled under their yokes; stray clots of those veins hung, freighted with cobweb, like chandeliers. The dim cubic space was a lung with end-stage emphysema. For sixty-two years it breathed Ford and Mercedes, Mercury and Saturn, Ram and Jaguar.

SAMPLE 2 Four stories of split concrete and missing exit signs. Potholes made parking impossible. Only weeds were left to patch the cracks.

SAMPLE 3 Sheets of rust-stained concrete provided underground refuge shelter from the city's swelter. The blinking fluorescent lights diffused barely enough light for cars navigating the garage's narrow avenues. Winding down to the lowest level, a beam of headlights were obscured from surveillance cameras above.

SAMPLE 4 A parking garage is an open area enclosed by cement walls, where people can park their cars while they run errands. Lines painted on the ground and walls indicate parking spaces, elevators, and flow of traffic. Typically, they're used for drug deals.

SAMPLE 5 Bold colors and cold tile. Macho male's handy tools and stacks of plastic storage containers. Empty circus cars and dusty classic motor vehicles.

SAMPLE 6 BY NANCY V. The gigantic, underground, concrete structure was damp and dimly lit. There weren't many cars parked and the ones that were there had seen its better days. It reeked of piss and homelessness; ironically, right under the red "no trespassing" sign, a homeless man had set up his home of cardboard boxes and dirty blankets

Endings

"Find the most surprising ending that works."

***Exercise**

Change the ending to your story. Share the change.

Titles (15 min)

If you're having trouble, what is the core story about? Name it that.

Hollywood title technique.

***Exercise.**

Let's name your stories.

Let's rename our story.

Getting Published

It's different now. You can publish without the publisher.

Closing