

ADVICE FROM RWA KISS OF DEATH 2023 DAPHNE DU MAURIER AWARD FOR
EXCELLENCE IN MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE FINALISTS

I asked our 2023 finalists what their favorite craft books and writing resources were, and here are their answers:

Paul Spencer (Black Mark)– Finalist Unpublished Mainstream Category

As an unpublished author, my favorite craft books and writing resources? It's a long list, but as for books, I'd go with "On Writing Well" by William Zinsser and "Self-Editing for Fiction Writers" by Renni Brown and Dave King. Online, I'm a big fan of the Authors Publish website and newsletter, and pretty much everything from Jane Friedman.

Janet Ciccarelli (Facets of Murder)– Finalist Unpublished Mainstream Category

I'm not sure I can narrow my choices to just one, so I'll have to go with one I'm currently enjoying: *The Heroine's Journey* by Gail Carriger.

Mary Keenan (Oriole) – Finalist Unpublished Mainstream Category

How to Write Best-Selling Fiction by James Scott Bell. He makes every element of the narrative arc easy to understand and execute, and his examples—often from familiar movies—reinforce the ideas so effectively it's easy to remember them while writing your own work.

TK Sheffield (Vintage Model) – Finalist Unpublished Mainstream Category

Favorite Craft Book or Writing Resource: [The Valerie Biel Writing Blog](#). Val is blogger, publicist, and tremendous resource for Wisconsin authors. Her craft tips, writer's forum, and author interviews on her "Books & Beer" channel are outstanding. She's a huge inspiration in our area, and she's counseled and encouraged many, many authors, including me. She's a writer of wonderful middle grade stories, too!

Karen White-Owens (His Partner) – Finalist Romantic Suspense Unpublished Category

My favorite writing resource is the Internet. It's great to be able to check out a question without calling a library or doing major research on my own. I simply go to Google and type in my question and an answer pops up. You can't always take the information as fact, but it is a great place to start, and the search can be done from the comfort of your home on your computer.

Eliza Carter (Murder's Mistress) – Finalist Romantic Suspense Unpublished Category

Best writing resource: Other writers, whether it be by meeting them in writers' groups, at conferences, or through social media. Also, I really like *Writer's Digest* and *How to Write a Mystery: A Handbook from Mystery Writers of America*.

Anne Belen (Suspended in Darkness) – Finalist Romantic Suspense Unpublished Category

Go-to resources for unpublished authors: Having digested the basics (The Writers Journey, Save the Cat, etc.), my go-to resources these days are The Plot Whisperer and the Margie Lawson writer's academy online. Those help me shore up my writerly blind spots—and boy do I have plenty. :)

Annie R. McEwen (Tamsin Lee and the Jaguar God) – Finalist Romantic Suspense Unpublished Category

Some of the resources that have helped me in my writer's journey thus far are my RWA RAMP mentor Paula Judith Johnson, The Fictionary Community, and ProWritingAid, especially that platform's Romance Writers' group. My beta readers and critique partner Meghan have been huge helpers, too.

Nadine Dandorf (Compromised Vows) – Finalist Romantic Suspense Unpublished Category

My favorite craft books are by Anne Lamott, KM Weiland, and Larry Brooks.

Tracey Devlyn (Flash Point) – Finalist Published Long Romantic Mystery and Suspense Category

Two craft books that helped me with developing character and plot are *Story Genius* and *Save the Cat Writes a Novel*. *Story Genius* helped me get a clearer picture of what hero and heroine believed—or their *misbelief*—before they ever stepped on scene. Their misbelief colors everything they do and know throughout the book. AKA it helps push the plot forward. *Save the Cat Writes a Novel* helped me figure out why my writing always stalls out around 20,000 words (the end of Act II). Now, when I start petering out, I pull *The Cat* off my bookshelf and brainstorm ways to jumpstart the story again. If you're thinking I'm a plotter, you'd be wrong-o. Nor am I a complete discovery (aka pantsers) writer. So what am I? A little of both. I grumble, I brainstorm, I write. Then repeat, over and over, until I have a completed first draft.

I asked our finalists what they wish they knew when they started writing and here are their answers:

Nadine Dandorf (Compromised Vows) – Finalist Published Mainstream Mystery and Suspense Category

I've always been a daydreamer but didn't start writing until 2011. I have learned so much since that first draft when I created this story (as my own therapy) about betrayal by someone in authority who is also a trusted friend. It took dozens of drafts and years to publication and I'm still learning about the balance of story, conflict, and emotion that I had no idea existed when I wrote that first page.

Jodé Milman (Hooker Avenue) – Finalist Published Mainstream Mystery and Suspense Category

When I began writing, I knew nothing about writing mysteries or about any other genre. As a lawyer, I was a storyteller charged with advocating my client's position to a judge, jury and my adversary. I was technical writer, working within a rigid set of rules. I wish I had taken writing classes, attended conferences, and joined writing groups BEFORE I sat down to write my first novel. I would have saved a lot of time and energy, and not have written a 135,000-word first draft. I would have known about story structure, pacing, point of view, dialogue, character motivation, and plotting, rather than believing I could write a book because I was an avid reader. Perhaps, it would have

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taken me almost ten years to have my first novel published. As soon as I enrolled in the classes, attended the conferences, and participated in the writing groups, my writing improved. I began to understand the craft of writing from the heart, not just the imagination. These three outlets presented a fresh perspective on my work-in-progress and I learn from the criticism and suggestions, making my work stronger...and my hide tougher.

Danielle Wong (Last Liar) – Finalist Published Mainstream Mystery and Suspense Category

This is one of the most magical jobs in the entire world, but it is definitely not devoid of ongoing challenges and obstacles. Authors--whether emerging or established--always seem to agree on that. Imposter syndrome and self-doubt come with the territory, and it's important to get as comfortable with rejection as possible. It's just part of the process! Genuine passion always comes through, so write what sets your heart on fire and tell the stories that need to be told.

Carol Potenza (Spirit Daughters) – Finalist Published Mainstream Mystery and Suspense Category

That you need to write what fulfills you as a person and a writer, and then every word you put on the page will be a joy, not a chore.

Lynn Shannon (Christmas Threat and Necessary Peril) – Finalist Published Novella Mainstream Mystery and Suspense Category

There's no silver bullet. This quote comes from Becca Syme with the Write-Better-Faster Academy. It means there isn't one perfect way to do something or a single correct path. It's a great reminder because we're inundated with advice. Write every day, you can't edit a blank page, Tiktok is the place to be, and so on. It can be hard to know which suggestions to listen to or what path to choose. We end up trying everything and get frustrated or we freeze in fear of doing the *wrong* thing. Learning your process as a writer, whatever that is for you, is the most important thing you can do for your career. Allow yourself the space to make mistakes and the permission to try things only to abandon them later if they don't work for you. There's not one perfect path, there's just your path.

DL Wood (The Vow) – Finalist Published Novella Mainstream Mystery and Suspense Category

I wish I had known that every writer's experience looks different, and that's okay. That I shouldn't spend so much time comparing myself to others — how many books they published this year, where their books are sold, or the reviews they are getting — but rather focus on being the best novelist I can be using the writing model that works for me and actually fits into my life.

Toni Anderson (Cold Silence) – Finalist Published Long Romantic Mystery and Suspense Category

I wish that I'd realized it never seems to get any easier. :)

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Rachel Grant (Crash Site and Into the Storm) – Finalist Published Long Romantic Mystery and Suspense Category

Everyone should read romantic suspense. It's my favorite escape and you can't go wrong with these authors: Toni Anderson, Melinda Leigh, Pamela Clare, Laura Griffin, Barbara Freethy, Jayne Ann Krentz, and I know I'm forgetting so many other favorite authors!

Janet Oppedisano (Disarming Caine) – Finalist Published Long Romantic Mystery and Suspense Category

Everyone's different. Plotter vs pantsers, plot-driver vs character-driven stories, morning writer vs night writer. Not every piece of advice will work for everyone, but the challenge is understanding which advice is right for you... and then understanding it's okay to put the rest aside. Just because it sounds like "everyone" writes one way or another doesn't make it true. Be gentle with yourself as you try things out and figure out your own process.

Tracey Devlyn (Flash Point) – Finalist Published Long Romantic Mystery and Suspense Category

Character beats plot. In genre fiction, you can't have one without the other. However, readers will generally forgive a weak plot. They won't love reading a poorly developed character.

Jordyn Redwood (Christmas Baby Rescue) – Finalist Published Short Romantic Mystery and Suspense Category

What's one thing I wish I knew about writing now that I didn't when I started? Flat out-- it's hard work. I think it's easy to feel disheartened when you're on this journey we call writing particularly if you're seeking traditional publication. There're so many ups and downs. If there is a story in your heart-- please write it. That story was given to you for a reason. If what you wrote doesn't get published-- then start the next book. Always be reading, learning, and writing. If it can happen for this pediatric nurse who never majored in English-- it can happen for you, too.

Juno Rushdan (Wyoming Winter Rescue) – Finalist Published Short Romantic Mystery and Suspense Category

My writing advice to new writers would be for them to understand that there will be days when you can't put two words together, days when naysayers get into your head. However, you have to rise above all that and not give up when it becomes hard. Also learn to cherish the days when the words fall from your fingertips to write something beautiful. If writing is what you really want to do, then sit your butt in the chair and just do it!

RL Merrill (Connection) – Finalist Published Romantic Mystery and Suspense Category

For published authors: What do you wish you knew about writing or writing craft that you know now: I wish I would have written this book sooner (I finished book one in 2012 and started this one right away, but I put it aside), but I know that I wasn't ready to write it

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yet. I also learned through writing this book not to take the easy way out. I had to really push myself in this book, and with the help of my editor Kelli, I was able to make it stronger than I would have if I wrote it way back in the beginning of my writing journey.

Marissa Garner – *Forbidden Love* – pub rom sus

Writing the book is the easy part; getting noticed in the marketplace is much harder.

Rose Sartin (*Heartstone*) – Finalist Published Romantic Mystery and Suspense Category

Don't lose your story. I tweaked my first book every time an author or editor spoke about content expectations in the writing industry. Insecure, I tried to make my book fit accepted parameters. In the process, I lost my story. I also lost the excitement and satisfaction of being a writer. I was close to giving up my dream of becoming a published author. Then I got some excellent advice from

Velda Brotherton, a well-known author of historical romance, and a good friend. She told me to put my book back together the way I wanted—to find my story again.

Don't get me wrong. Rules are generally rules because they work. Things like grammar, sentence structure, character development, world building and pacing are essential to good storytelling. But we need to remember the story is the most essential element of a good book. Don't let it get lost.

Mimi Mathews (*The Belle of Belgrave Square*) – Finalist Published Romantic Mystery and Suspense Category

I wish I'd understood earlier in my career that the first draft doesn't have to be perfect. I used to (and often still do!) spend way too much time revising every scene before progressing to the next one. It's generally better to get the whole book on the page and then revise it in a second and third pass. It gives invaluable distance from the work, which helps view a story's strengths and weaknesses with a clearer eye.