

# If I Knew Then What I Know Now...

*lessons learned by experienced  
authors*

≡ **Alicia Rasley** ≡

If I knew then what I know now....

## **IF I KNEW THEN...**

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## Becoming a Writer

**Dianne Drake** What I wish I'd known "way back then" was that nothing is more important than great writing and great storytelling. I started at a time where all the attention was focused on counting lines on a page or getting your margins adjusted properly, when it was, and always has been, about the writing.

**Melinda Jane Harrison** Never write for money, LOL.

**Kallypso Masters** Being a writer is a solitary, sedentary endeavor. Don't let your health suffer as a result. Try to get up and move at least once every hour or two. Better yet, schedule an hour-long workout for some point in the day. And drink lots of water to keep your eyes hydrated. It will help avoid eye strain.

**Geoffrey Mehl** To be unafraid, to write without fear. When at last you really let yourself go, really get into the skins of characters, you confront your very soul, the artistic core of yourself. That moment of truth and honesty sets you free. And it's wonderful, the difference between being in a closet and being in the whole world.

### **Cathy Campbell**

I wished I'd understood genre and target market better.

**Delle Jacobs** Learn the rules-but even better learn the best ways to break them.

**Anna Rossi** I wish I'd known that linked stories were going to be so big, and set up in my books some kind of link that I could still be connecting new stories too! I always just wrote "standalones."

**Blythe Gifford** A good book, even a really good book, is not a sufficient condition. It is not even a necessary condition. And the stuff about connected books is good too! Had I but known the power of a series...

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## Making the Story: Plot and Character

**Alicia Rasley** I wish I'd known back then that plot is what happens when change happens. I would have saved a lot of time writing circular, episodic stories if I just known that: Plot is what happens when change happens.

**Debbie McClure** Outlines are your roadmap and savior! I wish I'd known that when I wrote my first book, then decided to write a sequel. It's amazing what you forget, like a minor character's name, eye and hair colour, and time line events! Now I never start writing until I have at least a basic outline that I continue to add or delete things as I go.

Also, keep a backup copy of everything! I've lost whole files and revisions because I forgot to keep a running back up. Now there's frustration for you.

**Jeff Rasley** I've learned to be conscious of the "rule of 3s": Using 3 examples, 3 objects in sentences, 3 sections to a book, etc. 3 is a sacred/mystical number that we tend to use in grouping, so it just seems to feel right when something can be understood in a threesome. It helps in writing to be conscious of using it.

**Jane Perrine** Writing isn't easy. Plotting is hard if you want to write an unpredictable story, and then characters need to be motivated deeply.

**Mallory Kane** Every scene should further the plot, the heroine's journey to her goal, or the hero's journey to his goal. Or preferably all three. Even the sex scenes.

**Shalanna Collins** Readers need someone to sympathize/empathize with. If you don't have anyone admirable, it's going to be tough. You can have a "nasty" protagonist in the beginning, but you need to have them "Save the Cat" and show they are truly worthy of redemption and show that by the end of the book they will redeem themselves. I have found it difficult to read books with people I cannot admire.

**Chris Todd** If your character is supposed to be great" at something, then write him/her that way. If a character is always avoiding defeat by some "brilliant" (desperate really) ploy, then he/she is not great, he/she is just lucky.

## If I knew then what I know now....

**Margaret Crowley** Plotting isn't knowing the character's backstory. (Though that's vital). Plotting is the arc of the story. There is an internal arc and an external arc and one pushes the other.

**Amy Nichols Pfaff** Don't be afraid to get to know your story people. Build the plot out of the wounds and fears from his/her past. Make them face those fears a lot. (Good book for this is Story Genius).

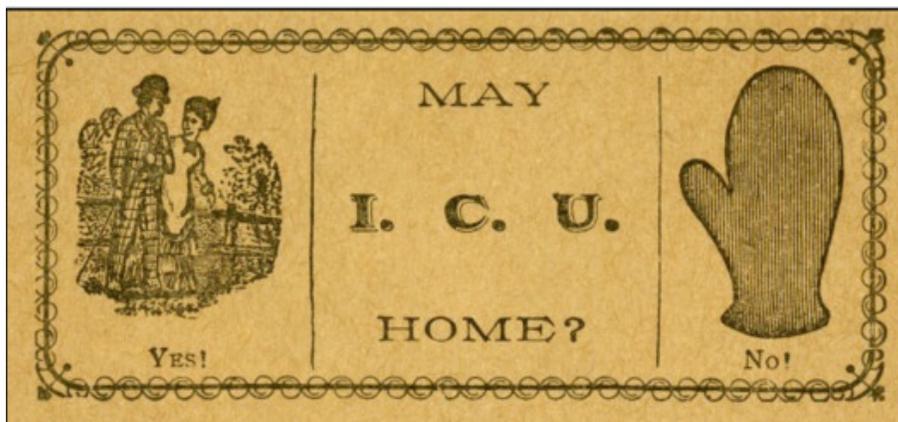
**Von Jocks** A negative character goal ("she doesn't want to change") is harder to write than a positive goal ("she wants to win the position of mayor again").

**Barbara Keiler** Characters: If characters don't feel alive inside you, they won't come alive on the page. Plot: The story is where you want to go. The plot is the road that takes you there.

### **Janet Wellington**

PLOT: The plot exists to force the characters to face their fears/wounds.

**Karin Gillespie** The most important trait about a character is his or her desire, and it needs to be a fairly concrete desire ("Peace of mind," for instance, isn't a concrete enough desire. But wanting to learn to meditate is concrete.). The desire line drives the entire novel. Example: Scarlett's desire for Ashley.



## If I knew then what I know now....

**Mary Watson** I have learned that everything MUST rely on cause and effect.

**Jody Wallace**

Figure out how the book ends before you bother starting it, LOL. And with characters: if you let your secondary characters take over, you will regret it.

**Cynthia Martin** Well: if you have a high point, stop THERE. Don't hang onto a previous plan when the stuff on the page makes a natural and satisfying end.

**James Rasley** I would write more compelling villains. A way to make your villain compelling is to give them morally just motivations. A villain should be the hero of their own story.

**Bill Craig** The most important thing I ever learned about plot was that the best stories are where the characters drive the plot.

**Elizabeth Ayers**

Make your characters likable and relatable very quickly. Readers must identify with the characters very quickly. You must invest the reader into the story.



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## Completing the Story

**Virginia Taylor** I have learned that when the plot gets stuck to take a long walk because that somehow opens my brain to new ideas.

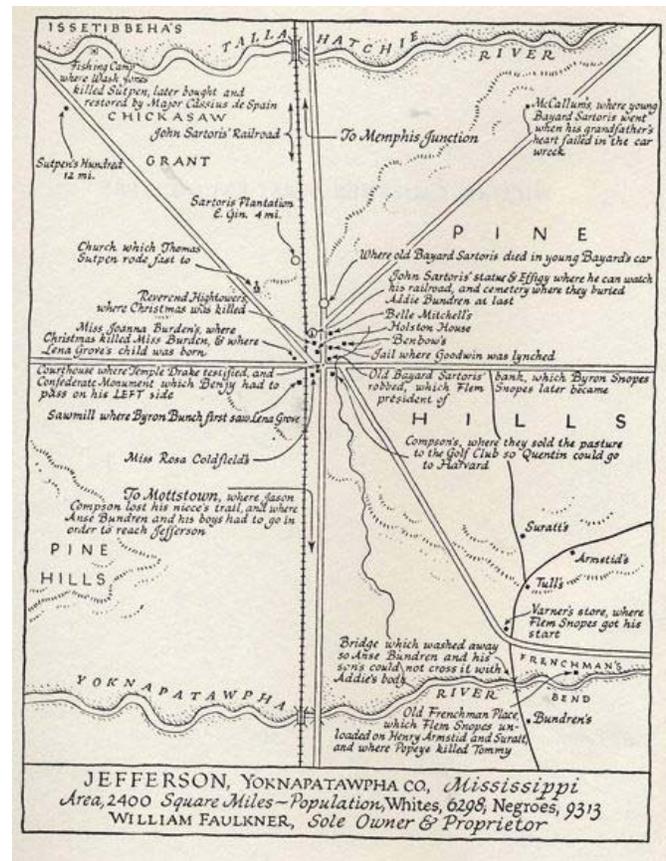
### ML "Matt" Buchman

Stop revising. You will always improve more by writing a new book than revising an old one.

**Jan Thompson** Thank you re: "stop revising."

I had a book that took me 10 years to write. I made at least 57 revisions. I could have written 5-10 more books during that time. I finally solved the Groundhog Day effect. I hired a pro editor and set a deadline.

**Jessica Lauryn** In the very beginning I'd sort of rewrite everything versus edit. I learned how to work with what I'd written, editing along the way. I wish I'd grasped the concept earlier - it would have saved me a lot of time!



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## Staying a Writer

**Greg Cryns** You can't read too much.

**Janet Wellington** Do you want to write....or do you want to be published? These are two very, very different goals. If you want to write, then write--learn the craft so you are pleased with what you create. If you want to publish, well, there is much more to learn...you must hone your craft and also learn about the business of writing.

**Diana Villafane** I cannot write to publish. By this I mean, produce a product that sells. That is just not art. It is like selling my virtue. Also, I cannot write on demand. There has to be an inner motivation, and I must have something of import to say. So as the world runs, I will never be "a successful writer".

**Amanda McCabe** Well....persistence. That's the number-one most important quality, I think. Just keep writing, keep moving ahead. And write what you love, those are always the best books :)

**Jeanette Levellie** Don't take yourself so seriously. Have fun and it will show in your writing. Don't be afraid to experiment with different genres and styles. Just because it's hard doesn't mean you aren't called to do it. The most profound prayer is "help me, Jesus!"

**Ian Healy** Write books you would want to read, because there are people out there like you looking for books like that.



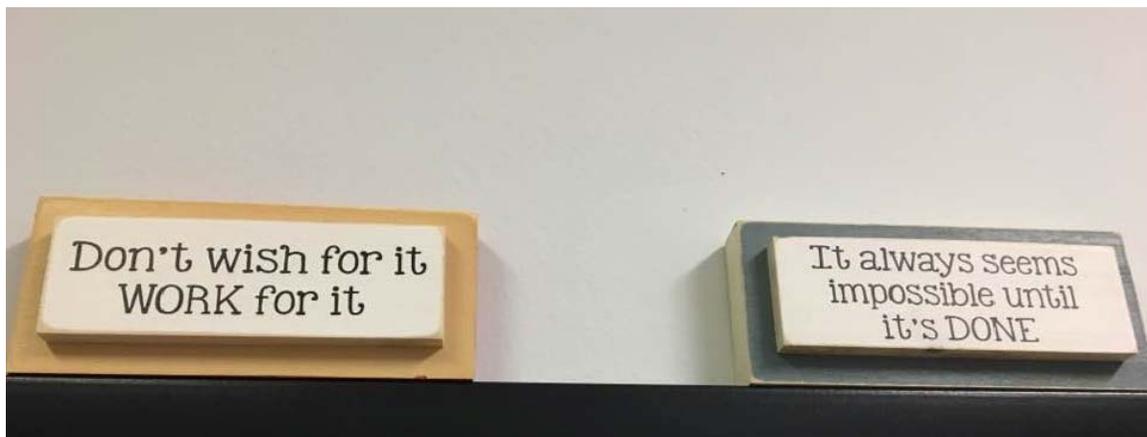
## If I knew then what I know now....

**Merry Banerji** Write for yourself and don't worry about the market.

**Mallory Kane** Something that my oldest writer friend told me: Trust yourself and your writing and protect it.

**Shalanna Collins** You must write something you love. Something you want to read. You couldn't find it to read, so you had to write it. Writing "to the market" never works, even though it SEEMS as though it should. The passion and belief is not there, so the spark readers want is missing. If you love chick lit, write chick lit, even though the genre has been declared dead. Worry not, as something will come around again that probably will not be called "chick lit," but you'll recognize it when you see it and your story will please those readers.

**Mary Watson:** Write for the reader you are, not for the writer you're trying to be.



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## Writing as a Business

**Grace Kone** I wish I hadn't been so stiff-necked about refusing an offer from Ballantine for my first book, based on making the heroine older! (But more than 20 years - and a lot less money later - I still think *The Sometime Bride* was my best book, and I didn't want to change what I considered a vital part of it. Ah, well, I frequently advise to young writers to "do as I say, not as I did.")

### Jacqueline Diamond

After 101 published novels, there's a lot I wish I'd known, including that ebooks were on the horizon. Some pithy points I'd share are:

- Keep as many rights as possible. You don't know what's on the horizon.
- Save everything you write in as many formats as possible. Maybe the stuff I lost wasn't worth saving, but maybe it was.
- Keep notes, quotes, character descriptions etc. organized so you can find them.
- Understand that as life changes you, your writing will change, too. Don't lock yourself in—or shut out anything that interests you.
- Keep learning. Even if you're out of the biz for a while, stay in touch. Don't get too far behind or the obstacles may become too discouraging.



### Alicia Rasley

I wish I'd realized that readers love related books, where minor and major characters interact and reappear. I always wrote stand-alone books, and now I wish I'd gone ahead and made them all part of the same "world".

Also, I wish I would have anticipated how very important it would be to restrict the option clause in contracts to very narrow criteria—"The publisher has the right to view for 30 days the author's next 75,000-word cozy mystery"—rather than accept the confiscatory option clauses that pretty much gave the publisher the forever right to any future book, including the church cookbook you proofread, thereby having the ability to pretty much halt your career for years. Newer publishers have been sneaking in even more unjust option clauses. I wish I'd understood—if they won't pay you for the option to your next book, they shouldn't have any right to it at all.

## If I knew then what I know now....

**Kate Douglas** I wish I'd known that copy edits weren't carved in stone, that I could disagree with what the CE said and ignore suggestions that even my editor made if they didn't fit my view of the story. I was so frickin' naive when I first signed with NY that I just read all the changes and cringed, but I didn't know I could do anything with them.

Once I learned to argue for what I wanted, as long as I could make a sensible argument, I learned that editors were more than willing to go along with me. I think it took me about thirty books in NY to figure that out, but it makes it a lot easier now to state my point and, if it's important, dig in and not give up.

Funny story--I had a copy editor on one of my books with St Martin's Press who practically rewrote my book. It was a monumental waste of time, because I accepted very few of her "corrections." I had complained to my editor who told me to use STET wherever I wanted, that she would make sure I didn't get this CE again, but I had to share one of the classic "corrections." It's a scene that takes place in the kitchen, the hero is watching the heroine make breakfast, thinking that if he doesn't get laid soon he's going to spend way too much time around the woman with an erection (I think I used the term 'boner'), but it's one I had to share with my editor.

CE crosses the fairly graphic scene out and rewrites: *he felt a stirring in his loins.*

I copied the edit and emailed it w/o any explanation to my editor. Got an email back almost immediately: *There will be no stirring of loins.*

And no, I did not get that CE again.

**Steven Womack** STET means "put it back to the way it was." My friend Sharyn McCrumb told me once she had two rubber stamps made. One read:

STET

The other read:

STET, DAMMIT

## If I knew then what I know now....

**Timothy Judd Meyer** The joy of a creative endeavor can be literally trampled by the press of the "business" end of it all. It's not that I dislike so much the cold calling tasks, but I am not fond of getting told "No".....or just being ignored.



### **Tracee Lydia Garner**

If I could have realized how long it can take between books (to finish the next and the next), I'd urge people to wait, wait, wait...to release. I tell all my students to tamp down the excitement or release just ONE book and try to think longer term.

IF you are going to self publish (and this goes for submitting trad too), really think about waiting to release it until books 2, 3, 4....are done drafts and in editors' hands... are done, yes, even if they are not a series. Bottom line, WAIT and TRY to strike while hot. Things happen and you won't finish the next book as fast as you'd like so why not wait! Fizzle out is for real! And nothing really devastating happens if you wait, so you get a few more gray hairs but those are free!

**Jenny Brown** I wish I had known how much of the fun goes out of writing when you have a contract hanging over your head. Alicia warned me to write a whole bunch of books before I got serious about selling, but I didn't pay enough attention to her advice. I finally rediscovered the pleasure of writing strictly for myself. I won't attempt to publish any more fiction until I have a pile of books I enjoyed writing completed. The writing was by far the most pleasurable aspect of the whole novelist experience for me. The rest of it never lived up to my hopes in

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any way. So there is no reason for me to write fiction unless I'm having an exciting voyage of discovery experience.

**A best-selling novelist who prefers to remain anonymous (but I can attest—she knows what she's talking about!)**

Nobody--not your editor, agent, beta, or even your mom--is going to protect or promote your brand the way you will. Yes, this should be obvious, but I was particularly slow to catch on to the fact that agents in our industry have no clue what a fiduciary relationship means, or what conflict of interest means.

I'm un-agented, for reasons.

The other lesson: Trust your gut. There are contracts you don't want, readers you don't want, bundles you should run from, loops that are toxic. If you get the uh-oh feeling, listen to it.



**Celia Yeary** Love your book...if you don't, no one else will either.

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## Staying a Writer

**Jinny Kirby-Baxter** Just write! You have no idea how fast the years go by and before you know it, time will run out.

**Laura Hayden** If I knew then what I know now, I might not have taken a chance. Sometimes ignorance is bliss, which isn't to say that you should go into our career field unaware or uneducated. But there are some industry lessons that you must learn through time, sweat and sheer cussedness. You can't be simply warned or informed.



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About the author:

Alicia Rasley is a RITA-award winning Regency novelist who has been published by major publishers such as Dell, NAL, and Kensington. Her women's fiction novel *The Year She Fell* has been a Kindle bestseller in the fiction category. *Until Death*, a mystery, was released by Bell Bridge Books. She is also the author of the Writer's Digest book, *The Power of Point of View*, and *The Story Within Plotting Guide*. You'll find more writing articles at the [Plot Blueprint website](#).

Please feel free to share this with your writer friends!

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If you're a character-driven writer in search of a plot, or a plot-driven writer in search of characters, this is the course you've been waiting for. **30 Days to Blueprint Your Plot** will help you explore your own story and connect your plot directly to your characters, and vice versa. Using the exercises, you'll be working towards a more vivid and coherent plot, and vital and active characters.