

The Writers Network News: October 2024

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The Writers Network News

Editor: Bobbie Christmas

Sponsor: Zebra Communications

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Founded in 1992

<https://www.zebraeditor.com/>

Notes

Some links in this newsletter are created through TinyUrl.com, which converts long links into shorter ones.

Our format doesn't support italics, so italics are indicated with underlines before and after words.

Writer's Quote of the Month

I write a book or a short story at least three times—once to understand it, the second time to improve the prose, and a third to compel it to say what it still must say. —Bernard Malamud, author (1914–1986)

Bernard Malamud was one of the best known American Jewish authors of the twentieth century. His baseball novel, The Natural, was adapted into a 1984 film starring Robert Redford.

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You must resubscribe with your new address before your old address expires. Our double-opt-in, no-spam policy does not allow me to change your address. If our email to you bounces, our system automatically unsubscribes you. To ensure you never miss an issue of The Writers Network News, you must resubscribe with your new address. Go to <https://www.zebraeditor.com/> and sign up with your new address, and do it before you stop using your old address.

One: From the Editor's Desk: First-Line Foibles

Dear Fellow Writers:

How important is the first line in your novel or short story? I'll give you a real-life example.

I'm semiretired now, so I don't accept every project I'm offered. Recently a self-publishing company known to publish almost anything, as long as the client pays, asked me to edit a novel. To make my decision to accept or not, I opened the file. I read the first sentence and said, "Yes! This novel is one I want to read, so I'll gladly edit it."

How did I know the novel was one I'd enjoy? The opening line was one of the cleverest I'd read in a long time. Because the work is proprietary, at least until it's published, I can't tell you the actual sentence. What I can tell you is that it was short. It started out somber and ended with a surprising element of humor.

My initial impression was correct. The novel was one of the best I've edited for that company. Without trying too hard, the author had inserted small bits of humor throughout, and the story had a strong plot and unique characters, plus the protagonist grew through the experience.

I've seen a recurring hashtag online, #FirstLineFriday, so I've read many a writer's first line posted in hope of positive recognition. Few match the one I'm talking about. Most are too long, an attempt to fill in too much information at once. Some are dull, such as, "It was an ordinary day until . . ." Folks, all days are ordinary until something out of the ordinary happens, so why open with a commonplace observation?

Conventional wisdom says to start a story at the point where things go wrong. For example, instead of "It was a typical

day until Mary opened the mail,” let readers know what happened when Mary opened the mail and forget all the verbiage that precedes it.

After reading that strong opening line in the novel I mentioned, I felt inclined to include a little lesson in this letter to writers today. Many writers have asked me how to write a strong opening. My advice is to write a strong story first. A powerful opening line may end up being the last thing you write, instead of the first.

If you’d like to share your opening line with me, send it by email. I won’t share your line with others unless you give me permission, but I just may give you a little feedback for free. I’m not making promises, but I’ll do what I can.

Yours in writing,  
Bobbie Christmas [Bobbie@zebraeditor.com](mailto:Bobbie@zebraeditor.com) or [bzebra@aol.com](mailto:bzebra@aol.com)  
Book doctor, author of award-winning *Write In Style*, owner of Zebra Communications, editor of “The Writers Network News,” and senior editor of *Enjoy Cherokee Magazine*

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## Two: Ask the Book Doctor: What Agents and Publishers Want

By Bobbie Christmas

**Q:** I just received an encouraging response from an agent I queried regarding my manuscript of fiction. The agent is requesting, among other things, a description (approximately one-page summary) and a synopsis (approximately two- to five-page-summary).

I don’t want to blow it now. What do you think the agent is looking for in the description? Do you think it’s supposed to be just a more condensed version of the synopsis?

**A:** Congratulations on getting an encouraging response from an agent—a rarity!

A description is a summary of a novel, and like a teaser, it should entice a reader to want to read the story. Here’s a brief imaginary summary:

What happens when a forty-seven-year-old woman finds herself divorced and destitute in Chicago? In 1942 Mary Devine, rather than become homeless, turns her abode into a house of ill repute. In 80,000 words *The Escapades of Madam Devine*, a quirky, irreverent novel, covers Devine’s adventures, challenges, setbacks, and triumphs with several hilarious twists.

The description might go on to compare the book to one by John Irving or some other humorous writer.

A synopsis, on the other hand, covers the entire plot from beginning to end. The synopsis never talks about the book, only about the story itself. It never asks questions, compares the book to other books, or teases the reader the way a description can.

**Q:** I’ve written a self-help book for people living with a specific chronic disease. Now I don’t know what to do next. I’d rather not self-publish because I’ve heard that a traditional publisher is more likely to get the book into bookstores. What’s my next step, though? Do I just send the manuscript to lots of publishers and hope for the best?

**A:** If you hope to find a traditional publisher, don’t send the manuscript anywhere until an agent or publisher requests it. You now need to know how to get them to request it. I’ll explain. You have a few major steps to take before you submit anything anywhere.

Your next step is to write a strong query and a full proposal. The proposal is a big undertaking, and before you start, research and learn how to write a proper book proposal.

Once your query letter and book proposal are ready to send out, research publishers that are interested in the genre of your manuscript. Although you can perform a search online, what worked better for me was to go to a bookstore. There I found the shelf that held books in the same genre as my book. I noted the companies that published them. I then researched those publishers to determine how they preferred to accept submissions. If they don’t accept unagented submissions, you’ll need to find an agent, which is another large and complicated step. If their information indicates that they accept unagented queries or proposals, send them whichever item they accept. If they respond and request the manuscript, only then should you send the full manuscript for consideration.

Yes, even though you may have finished writing your book, you have to write a query or proposal, and that’s a big step and a learning curve for new writers.

Here’s a bonus for those who haven’t yet completed their nonfiction book. Some publishers will buy your book based on a strong proposal and give you time to complete your book. Your proposal will have to include a few sample chapters, as all book proposals do, but you can state in the proposal how long it will take to finish your book.

Always keep in mind that when a publisher shows an interest in your book, almost everything is negotiable. If the publisher offers you an advance against royalties, the amount may be subject to negotiation. If your proposal says you’ll complete your book in six months and the publisher wants the book in three months, you may be able to negotiate to a time closer to your original completion date.

Two final warnings: 1) Traditional publishers never contact you before you contact them. Those that do may possibly be scammers. 2) Beware of any publisher that asks you to pay for anything. The ones that ask for money are not traditional publishers. If you pay for any part of the production, you are self-publishing.

I'm not disparaging self-publishing; I've done it myself, but you said you don't want to self-publish, so my information is for those who hope to sell a nonfiction book to a traditional publisher.

Send your questions to Bobbie Christmas, book editor, author of *Write In Style: Use Your Computer to Improve Your Writing*, and owner of Zebra Communications. [Bobbie@zebraeditor.com](mailto:Bobbie@zebraeditor.com) or [BZebra@aol.com](mailto:BZebra@aol.com). Read Bobbie's Zebra Communications blog at <https://www.zebraeditor.com/blog/>.

For much more information on hundreds of subjects of vital importance to writers, order *Purge Your Prose of Problems, a Book Doctor's Desk Reference Book* at <http://tinyurl.com/4ptjnr>. An excellent reference book for all writing groups.

Bobbie Christmas's five-time award-winning *Write In Style: How to Use Your Computer to Improve Your Writing* is available from Amazon at <https://tinyurl.com/y7ppcdkd> or buy it directly at <https://tinyurl.com/y7p9xkbb>.  
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Three: Subjects of interest to writers

Subscribers Write

Jim Gilbert reported, "I received a personalized reply to a query to a literary agent the other day. Not a form letter with my name and my book's title plugged into the appropriate spots, but an actual personalized response. What's more, it wasn't a rejection like all of the other replies from agents have been. The agent said that she saw something in the stuff I submitted that she liked, so she put my query in her 'maybe pile' to examine more thoroughly when she had more time. She warned me that it could take a few more months before she could get back in touch with me, but that's cool with me. After all, an agent didn't outright reject my query at first glance!"

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Hilary Tate wrote from Oregon to admonish me for misquoting Shakespeare in my previous newsletter when I wrote "Out damn spot." She's right and has the credentials to back her up. For thirty years she held the position of director of publications for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. She wrote, "You know, don't you? I can't be the first to feel obliged to mention this. It's 'Out, damned spot.' Although it probably sounds the same, we Shakespeare nerds like to be scrupulous."

Hilary continued in response to my information on bowdlerizing and said she would not want her own work bowdlerized, although she thought it would be interesting to see what elements the modesty monitors find objectionable.

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Guide to Writing Good Queries

Read an informative article and see samples of successful query letters here:  
<https://www.freedomwithwriting.com/freedom/uncategorized/query-letters-that-were-accepted-and-a-small-guide-to-writing-a-good-query/>

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Good-bye, Goodbye, or Good-by? Isle or Aisle? Hanger or Hangar? Foreword or Forward?

Which word is correct? A professional editor knows, but do you?

Bobbie Christmas, owner of Zebra Communications, offers three levels of editing service. See our services, pricing, reviews, and more at <https://www.zebraeditor.com/>

Zebra Communications: Excellent Editing for Maximum Marketability

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Just Because . . .

Just because I'm an editor, I want the world to know about the following phrase that's driving me bananas: "Just because (such and such) doesn't mean (so and so) ." Example: just because he's a teacher doesn't mean he knows how to edit a novel. The correct wording should be this "The fact that he's a teacher doesn't mean he knows how to edit a novel."

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Beware of Scammers Impersonating Publishing Houses

The official blog of Writer Beware shines a bright light into the dark corners of the shadow-world of literary scams, schemes, and pitfalls. In this blog entry it warns about scammers impersonating publishing houses.

<https://tinyurl.com/35deduu7>

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Manuslips and Missed Opportunities for Improvement

While editing a book filled with good investment advice, I found the following sentence:

If you put all of the eggs into one partner's retirement basket, the other might end up on the short end of the stick.

Can you see what's wrong with the sentence? How would you have written it?

Read the answer below.

The sentence has what we editors call a mixed metaphor. Putting eggs in a basket has nothing to do with sticks, long or short. I suggested the following recast: If you put all of the eggs into one partner's retirement basket, the other partner will end up with too few eggs.

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Manuslip: a slip in grammar, punctuation, or other error in a manuscript that often results in humor; a manuscript blooper

#### Etymology

Coined by Bobbie Christmas (1944 -) in Write In Style: How to Use Your Computer to Improve Your Writing (2004, 2015).

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#### Publishers Fight Book Banning

Penguin Random House, Simon & Schuster, Harper Collins, some authors, and others have filed a lawsuit against Florida education officials. The lawsuit alleges that the Florida law that brought about hundreds of book removals violates First Amendment rights to free speech. Read the article here: <https://wapo.st/3MvJpBX>

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#### Be My Friend on Facebook

Follow my adventures, opinions, and observations: <http://www.facebook.com/bobbie.christmas>

Follow Zebra Communications on Facebook for news for writers, writing-related cartoons, immediate updates, and other good stuff. <https://tinyurl.com/ydyn3pcu>.

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#### CMOS Online Q&A

This month someone posed a question to The Chicago Manual of Style Online that many of my clients have difficulty figuring out. The answer explains why. Here's the question:

Q. I thought Chicago style used to say to use only an apostrophe for the possessive of a name like "Harris" that ends in "s." Am I imagining things?

To get the answer to this question and many more based on Chicago style, go to <http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/qanda/latest.html>.

The Chicago Manual of Style sets the standard in book publishing for issues such as punctuation, capitalization, and much more. If you write fiction or nonfiction books, you will want to know about Chicago style or be sure to use a professional book editor intimately familiar with Chicago style.

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#### Will NoMoWriMo Be No More?

Authors are criticizing NaNoWriMo for not objecting to the use of artificial intelligence in its annual event challenging people to write a novel in a month.

National Novel Writing Month is an annual tradition in which writers try to crank out the first 50,000 words of a novel in November.

NaNoWriMo said writers were welcome to use artificial intelligence to "assist your creative process" but that utilizing AI to "write your entire novel would defeat the purpose of the challenge."

In response several authors on the NaNoWriMo board have stepped down or threatened to do so.

Read the full Washington Post article here: <https://wapo.st/4dP3Ky6>

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#### How Long Should a Book Blurb Be?

According to Pamela Kinney, the blurb about your book should be only one hundred to two hundred words long. "Any more than that," she says, "and readers will jump to another author's page and buy their book instead. You have only seven seconds to impress a reader, especially one online." Pamela adds, "It is all about selling your book, capturing readers' interests with that blurb."

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#### 18th Edition of The Chicago Manual of Style

The latest edition of The Chicago Manual of Style is about to come off the press. Essential to American book editors, the latest edition costs about \$75. I've ordered my copy. Authors won't have to buy a copy if they use an editor who keeps up to date with the latest changes in Chicago style.

I'm eager to receive my copy to see what the folks at the University of Chicago Press have changed this time.

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#### Write Tight: Learn What To Look For, How to Look for It, and What to Delete

In five-time award-winning Write In Style you'll learn how to find and delete or rewrite words, sentences, and phrases that weaken your writing.

Write In Style uses humor and expertise to show writers how to tighten and strengthen their writing and create a fresh voice.

To order: <https://tinyurl.com/y8fp5nym>

Want to buy the book in Kobo through Rakuten? Easy. Go to <https://www.kobo.com/us/en/ebook/write-in-style-3>

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#### Four: Contests, Agents, and Markets

##### Narratively

Narratively is devoted to original and untold human stories, nonfiction only. Rates begin at \$1,000; Most stories are between 3,000 and 6,000 words.

We are always interested in adding new, diverse voices to the mix. The true stories we publish are defined not by topic but by style: immersive, cinematic storytelling that takes readers inside another world, another life, through vivid scenes, colorful details and compelling narrative arcs. To read our full guidelines and send us a pitch, click here:

<https://narratively.submittable.com/submit>

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Eric Hoffer Awards  
Entry deadline January 21, 2025

AWARDS ARE OPEN to academic, independent, small press, and self-published books that were released or copyrighted in the last two years (January 2022 to January 2025), including unique books with small print runs. (Books over two years enter the LEGACY FICTION or LEGACY NONFICTION category.)

AWARDS/PRIZES: One grand prize will be awarded for the entire contest. In addition, each category will be awarded a winner, runner-up, and multiple honorable mentions. Books must be registered by CATEGORY and then are automatically considered for Individual Press Awards, the Montaigne Medal, the da Vinci Eye, the First Horizon Award, and the Hoffer Grand Prize.

<https://tinyurl.com/vts2s7xk>

##### ~~~~~ Tab Journal Seeks Poetry

Tab Journal is seeking poetry related to the general idea of luck, chance, and serendipity, to be published in early 2025.

There is no fee to submit. Tab Journal currently doesn't have funding to compensate contributors for the 2025 issues.

Staff will begin reading submissions on Sunday, October 20. All submissions received by that date will be considered, and submissions will remain open until the issue is filled.

<https://tinyurl.com/3uknu5ms>

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Do YOU have news for The Writers Network News? Send it in the body of an email to [Bobbie@zebraeditor.com](mailto:Bobbie@zebraeditor.com) or [bzebra@aol.com](mailto:bzebra@aol.com). Deadline: 18th of each month.

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