

How to write a successful thriller

From a veteran of the genre, here are 10 basic ingredients to mix up and bake

By Gary Braver

AS A CHARTER MEMBER OF International Thriller Writers, Inc., (ITW) I can tell you that the field of thriller writing has burgeoned and commands respect. No longer marginalized at mystery conventions, thriller writers and

fans now have their own organization—and its membership continues to soar. And the demand for thrillers is great, as evidenced by the fact that nearly every bestseller list includes at least one thriller title. So it's understandable why beginning writers are humming to join the scene—why they sign up in droves for thriller-writing workshops.

But before outlining some basics of a successful thriller, let me clear away some confusion. Thrillers are often lumped together with mysteries, with which they share some characteristics, such as crime, violence, police-procedural matters, suspense, dramatic action, cliffhanger scene endings and romance. But some fundamental differences distinguish the two genres and the respective writing strategies. Mysteries are about solving crimes. Thrillers are about preventing them. In mysteries something bad has already happened—like that body left in the opening scene—and the rest of the story is driven by detection, the methodical piecing together of clues until the hero nabs the villain at the end. Thus, mysteries are by

definition intellectual exercises—who-dunits. In thrillers, however, something bad is about to happen, and readers and protagonists alike may know who the villains are and where and when the mayhem will take place. The whole story is about good guys doing what they can to stop that.

And now for the basics ...

1 Let dread drive your thriller. Since every thriller is about stopping someone else's scheme of mayhem, the protagonists invariably find innocent people and themselves in danger. Thus, the engine that drives all thrillers is dread. It's what propels James Bond in every Ian Fleming tale, or Clarice Starling in Thomas Harris' *The Silence of the Lambs*, or, on a yet smaller canvas, what keeps Paul Sheldon writing for his life in Stephen King's classic *Misery*. So if you want to write a thriller, be certain that the dominant emotion is *dread*—for the hero and, vicariously, the reader.

Dread puts the protagonist on edge, makes him feel lost, desperate, even threatened with failure and death. These are emotions readers can empathize with, and reader empathy is fundamental to the story's success. We feel for Clarice; we fear for Paul in his horrible captivity at the hands of a homicidal fan.

2 Write about the underdog. The villain is arguably the most important character in a thriller. Why? Because the villain pro-

vides the story its plot and goal: preventing mayhem. He or she initiates the action, while the protagonist gives the story character—someone with whom readers need to empathize. So make your protagonist somebody with the most to lose. We all love the underdog—someone we're emotionally bound to; someone with a lot of painful baggage; someone who must also fight her own demons before she saves the day.

From the start, Clarice Starling has everything going against her: She's female in the male-dominated FBI; she's a student, lacking field experience; she's self-conscious of her rube roots, as Hannibal Lecter reminds her at the onset; she's walking wounded over the murder of her father when she was 14; and she is haunted by the screaming of slaughtered lambs from childhood. Worse, she must stop a serial killer who skins his female victims. Worse still, she must confide in the infamous cannibal-cum-serial-killer-cum-psychiatrist who knows Buffalo Bill's identity but likes playing mind games. Against all those odds, she must demonstrate strength, integrity and moral values while trying to nab the killer. When she does, we cheer.

3 Use multiple points of view. Most thrillers employ multiple POVs because of the various advantages. First, having four or five POVs lets you flesh out secondary characters. Every character thinks the story is about him or her, and each has distinct motives, desires and fears—

especially villains. No real villain looks in the mirror and says, “That’s the face of evil.” Instead, they have sweet-smelling reasons for their bad deeds: They didn’t have privileged childhoods; they were abused, deprived; they were at odds with society, the law, nature, God. Thus they feel entitled to get back, to make up for perceived injustices. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, we hear Buffalo Bill tell his dog that when he skins his next victim he will complete a girl suit so he can be pretty like his mother. Creepy as that is, we sense his twisted motives and transgender cravings as his character takes shape.

Second, multiple POVs create dramatic tension. If readers are privy to a villain’s plans, if they know more than the protagonist, suspense is intensified and the sense of dread ratcheted up as the villain closes in on his prey.

Third, multiple POVs create dramatic irony. Characters have different takes on other characters. In Dennis Lehane’s *Mystic River*, Dave Boyle ruminates on his secret killing of a pedophile the same night that Katie, the daughter of his ex-con friend Jimmy Marcus, is murdered across town. In a contiguous chapter, we hear Celeste Boyle’s interior agony as she breaks down and tells Jimmy Marcus that she suspects her husband, Dave, killed Katie. That creates an “Oh no!” moment and dread of the inevitable tragedy to come.

Fourth, multiple POVs allow alternate characters to supply important exposition and technical information. For example, it is through the interior reflections of Hannibal Lecter that we learn his connection to Buffalo Bill. This strategy spares the author from compromising the action scenes or gumming up the pacing with such details. As a writer, you don’t want your protagonist to explain how plastic explosives work while he’s running from them.

Caveat: Stick to one character POV per scene. Don’t toggle from one to the other. That’s cheating and jarring. Anchor every scene in a single mind’s eye.

4 **Open your book with action.** All thrillers are about preventing crime. Thus, many open with violent or menacing action.

Why? Because from the get-go, you want to hook the reader or get that bookstore browser to take your book to the cashier. An action opener not only promises danger, dread and brisk pacing but should suggest what’s at stake, possibly even the book’s slant or themes. *The Da Vinci Code* opens with the murder of the Louvre’s chief curator and suggests religious esoterica. My own novel *Skin Deep* opens with the murder of a beautiful woman and projects the theme of deadly obsession.

Although ideally your thriller should create a sense of dread from the opening scene, it need not begin with a crime. *The Silence of the Lambs* opens with Clarice being assigned to get a profile of serial killers from inmate “Hannibal the Cannibal” with the warning not to tell him anything personal. And Paul Sheldon is pulled out of a car accident and resuscitated by a clearly demented fan. In each initial scene, dread is established and so are the stakes.

Do not make the opening scene a “bio dump.” Do not open with character history, exposition or lots of description. Save that for later. The opening scene must be stripped to bare action.

Caveat: This does not, however, mean pedestrian prose. You should create carefully polished narrative and dialogue to cue readers that despite the minimalism, you’re no hack. And no

more than 10 typed double-space pages. Your purpose is the fast grab.

5 **Give your hero two quests.** From the outset know what your main characters want and what they fear, because all conflict reduces to desire versus danger.

Every good novel has two quests—what I call the Public Quest and Personal Quest. If your protagonist is an investigator, then his Public Quest is stopping the villain from doing evil. But he should also be fighting private demons—guilt, grief, addictions, loneliness, etc.—and trying to be at a better place by the end of the Public Quest.

This Personal Quest usually develops within the first third of the story and should climax with the Public Quest victory. Clarice Starling’s Public Quest is to get Buffalo Bill before he kills again. Her Personal Quest is to rise above all the odds against her: inexperience, gender, hillbilly roots, loss, and the haunting screaming of the lambs. Ironically she draws from her youth, femaleness, empathy, and her mother’s strength to prove her worth as an agent. At the end, both quests climax at once as she gets her man with professional expedience.

Likewise, Paul Sheldon in *Misery* wants to escape Annie Wilkes’ captivity. But soon he realizes that she plans to kill him and herself once he finishes the

More on pacing

- **AVOID** lengthy explanations or exposition in action scenes. Don’t stop to explain how plastic explosives work while on a chase.
- **AVOID** passive voice: “The screams could be heard in his bedroom.” Versus: “He heard the screams in his bedroom.”
- **AVOID** adverbs: “I don’t want to talk about it,” she said angrily. Versus: “I don’t want to talk about it,” she said and smacked her hand on the table.
- **MINIMIZE** sentences beginning with adverbial or participial phrases: “Trying to determine the fastest way out of the cellar, Diane ran for the bulkhead.” Versus: “Diana ran for the bulkhead. It was the fastest way out.”
- Write short paragraphs in scenes of high drama. They look faster on the page than big, thick ones.
- Scenes ending with cliffhangers keep reader reading. Consider:
Surprises or provocative announcements: “I’m going to kill Annie Wilkes.” (*Misery*)
Epiphanies: “The son of a bitch can sew.” (*The Silence of the Lambs*)
Someone from the past unexpectedly shows up: The gun-toting mother of the killer in Michael Connelly’s *The Lincoln Lawyer*.

—G.B.

book she forces him to write. So for the rest of the story, he decides at least he'll die a better writer. In the end, his type-writer proves to be the literal and figurative weapon that fulfills both quests.

It's this all-important Personal Quest where characters are fleshed out, where they re-examine their needs and desires, where they show their moral fiber and determination in conquering their demons. It's also where they earn our respect and prove their heroics.

6 Make your protagonist miserable. To show that your heroes have the right stuff, torment them. Fill their quests with false hope, anxiety, heartache and near-death experiences. Why? Because readers love to see heroes suffer. We know they're going to win, but not until the end—not until they've made it through the fires. How they handle those struggles determines the strength—and richness—of their character. By the end, they've earned our respect and their happiness, and we can enjoy the catharsis.

Compounding the conflicts for your protagonists also provides the requisite plot with twists and turns that keep the reader engaged. Just as Lecter is about to reveal to Starling Buffalo Bill's true identity, a sleazy psychologist betrays her. Lecter is turned off. Then Clarice is pulled off the case, forcing her to save the latest victim on her own.

Likewise, King throws hurdle after hurdle at Paul Sheldon as Sheldon tries to finish his book. Annie takes an axe to his foot, a knife to his thumb; his type-writer keeps losing keys; he's in constant pain and fear of his impending death; and Annie turns out to be a serial killer who's dying to kill them both. But he perseveres to write a better book and fight her to the death—hers.

7 Make your hero a changed person. Given all you've put your protagonist through, he or she should emerge a changed person at the end. Protagonists' quests are not just rites of passage, but extraordinary learning experiences. So they must end up at a higher, better place. Paul Sheldon wears a prosthetic; he still has nightmares about Annie Wilkes. But

he's a better man and writer. Likewise, Clarice Starling is stronger and more confident, and she has saved a lamb from slaughter. Even Hannibal Lecter sends her a note of praise at the end.

8 Pace your story. We're all put off at parties when a long-winded bore corners us. This is true of thrillers also. If the pacing is slow—if there's too much exposition or misplaced description, excessive character development, interior reflection and technical info, and not enough dramatic action—readers may grab another book. The challenge is knowing how much is too much and where to lace in important exposition while maintaining narrative thrust.

However slight, each scene should have a new character disclosure. Yet be certain such details relate to the plot or theme. If your protagonist likes tropical fish and the finny breed has nothing to do with the tale, then flush the fish.

Because thrillers are driven by dread, you need a ticking clock against which your protagonist must race to beat the villains. That countdown creates your story's requisite urgency. Here are a couple tips for fleshing out characters while not compromising the pacing (and see the sidebar on page 29 for more):

- Alternate fast-action scenes with slow-reflection/exposition scenes. As in thriller movies, a wham-bam action scene is almost always followed by characters reflecting on matters, filling in background, etc., while the audience relishes a moment's calm.
- Another strategy is to lace Private Quest material into a Public Quest scene. In *Skin Deep*, two homicide detectives return from an autopsy. During a lull, one partner's discussion of the case segues to his personal problems. So we get some take on the murder while glimpsing the conflicts that make up the Personal Quest. (These twin quests should never be far from each other.)

9 Show; don't tell. When you want to reveal an important aspect of a character, dramatize it. Readers want to be eyewitnesses to key plot developments.

Instead of telling readers that in their first meeting Clarice Starling stood up to Hannibal Lecter, Harris writes a brilliant dialogue exchange through the cell bars. Following Lecter's scathing mockery of Clarice's student status and rube roots, she presses him to point his "high-powered intellect" at himself and explain why he kills and consumes his victims. Her boldness is rewarded with Lecter giving her the first clue.

In *Misery*, instead of telling us Annie is crazy dangerous, we watch her hack a cop to death then drive over him with her Lawn-Boy mower. Disgusting details, but high drama. Yes, it's harder to do, but better writing also keeps up the pace and avoids long, dull summaries. Never pass up scenes of high drama.

10 Teach us something. All novels should entertain and educate. But thrillers in particular are about inside information, secrets—the workings of the FBI, CIA, criminal forensics, etc. Depending on the slant, you should share your expertise and research with readers. *Misery* teaches us something about the writing process, how authors create ideas and strategies to engage readers. Harris' novel teach us about forensics, criminal minds and butterflies.

Caveat: Know when too much technical detail is counterproductive. You don't want to blind your reader with science, for example, nor do you want to slow your story's pace with large blocks of explanation. Research is seductive and sharing it is fun. But you have to know when enough is enough.

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