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**An Excerpt From**

**The New Writer's  
Guide to  
Just About Everything**

by Sherry D. Ramsey

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## About the Author

### Background

Sherry D. Ramsey is a former lawyer who decided that the problems of her characters were more interesting (and easier to solve) than those of her clients. She has an ongoing love affair with reading and writing speculative fiction of all kinds, is a member of the Writer's Federation of Nova Scotia and is a founding member of The Story Forge Writer's Group. She has an author website at <http://www.thescriptorium.net/dmh/>.

Sherry is the publisher and editor of The Scriptorium (<http://www.thescriptorium.net>), a monthly web magazine for writers, and is an Editor at the Open Directory Project (<http://www.dmoz.org>). She lives in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, with her husband, daughter, son, dog, and an ever-changing number of fish.

### Publishing Credits

"Fiction Workshop for One" (article), upcoming in **Speculations**, August 2001

"Death of A Fish" (personal essay), broadcast May 17, 2001 on **CBC Radio One's "This Morning"** program, in the "First Person Singular" series (voiced by the author)

"The New Writer's Guide to Just About Everything" (e-book), March 2001

"Common Ground" (short story), **Nuketown** (<http://www.nuketown.com>), February 2001

"Tooth God Awakes" (short story), **Planet Relish** (<http://www.planetrelish.com>), February 2001

"The Halfhigh Vexation" (short story), **On Spec: The Canadian Magazine of Speculative Fiction**, Winter 1999

"Circle" (short story), **The Day The Men Went To Town** (Breton Books, 1999)

"Fantasy: Another Perspective" (article), **Sci-Fi Arizona** website (<http://www.scifi-az.com/sfaz-05.htm>), June 1998

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"Little Things" (short story), **Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine**,  
Winter 1997

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If you enjoy this excerpt and are interested in purchasing a copy of **The New Writer's Guide to Just About Everything**, please visit the secure server at <http://www.booklocker.com/bookpages/sherryramsey01.html> or contact the author at [sdramsey@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:sdramsey@ns.sympatico.ca)

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## INTRODUCTION

As a new writer, you don't have it very easy. You have all these ideas rolling around in your head just begging to get out onto the page. You yearn to open up that thin envelope and find a letter of acceptance and a contract inside. You dream of seeing your name on a by-line or the cover of a bestseller.

But whispering in your ear are the little voices of doom. You don't know how to get started in writing, or you're not sure if your writing is "good enough". Friends, family, and strangers look at you askance when you say you want to write. You don't know if your ideas can turn into finished works or what to do with them when they do, and there's already a daunting array of authors and books out there

There's also an array of just-as-daunting how-to-write books. Books on dialogue, books on plot, books on settings, characters, genres, editing, and on and on and on. If you try to read them all, where do you find time to write? And how much money do you have to invest in this writer's library?

**The New Writer's Guide to Just About Everything** aims to solve some of those problems. It covers a lot of writing ground, in the form of short articles on a wide range of topics, distilled down to the most basic advice. Advice on developing ideas, the craft of writing, techniques for editing, basic rules for submitting your work, and even a little bit of philosophy about writing, for good measure.

Most articles end with a **Do it!** prompt, so you can work on applying what you just read right away. There's a writer's quiz, a glossary of writing terms, a new writer's FAQ, recommendations of books, software and websites, and fifty writing prompts to get your creativity flowing. And, as a bonus, a guide to conducting your own personal workshop to improve your fiction manuscript.

Throughout the book you'll find hyperlinks to outside sources, and you'll also see this symbol, "G", to indicate a writing term that you'll find explained in the Glossary.

After you've read the articles and reviewed your work in light of their information, you'll probably discover you need extra help on one or two topics. That's when to invest your time and money in longer, in-depth how-to works. You have to find out what you don't know first!

No, new writers don't have it easy. It's a big world of authors and publishers and editors and agents out there. But **The New Writer's Guide** will make your foray into that world a little easier, a little more fun, and a lot more productive. So get reading—and then get writing!

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## Is Your Idea a Story? (*From Chapter 1 – Ideas*)

Every story or article starts with an idea. Maybe it's a full-blown plot, maybe it's a single scene, a character, or an unusual object. Perhaps it's an issue close to your heart, something you saw on the news, or a personal experience. We find ideas all around us, every day, and they start us wondering, "Is there a story in that?". Ask yourself these simple questions to help you determine if your idea has what it takes to grow into a fully-realized piece.

**1. Does it have a direction?** Is there somewhere you can take that idea that has a beginning, a middle, and an end? Can you visualize it in scenes, playing out a series of events to a climax? Does it make a point, teach something useful, or reveal a truth? Is it really a story, or is it a personal essay, or a vignette, or just an idea with nowhere to go?

Sometimes, on closer inspection, an idea is just that—only an idea. It's static, just an interesting element with no real story possibilities. Or it doesn't have enough depth for an article. That's okay. File it away in your idea book. Some day in the future it might click with something else and grow beyond its beginnings.

**2. Will it speak to someone?** Does someone stand to lose, or gain, or be changed by the idea? Will it teach a lesson or provide information that someone will find valuable? Who? Will readers want to know what happens? Do **you** want to know what happens?

There's one thing for certain. If you aren't interested in your idea, your readers won't be, either. A story or article has to hold some appeal for you or that indifference will find its way into your writing. Save your words for the writing that intrigues and involves you most.

**3. Is it a story you can write?** Do you have the knowledge you need to write this story, or are you willing to do research to get it? Can you distance yourself emotionally from the topic, or is it too personal for you? Can you deal fairly with the idea, and write the story it deserves?

You can't cut corners with your writing, because there is always someone out there who will call you on it. If you don't have or can't get the facts you need, it's not your story to write. And often if you're **too** close to the story, your bias shows too strongly through your writing. Be certain the idea is right for you.

**4. Why do you want to write it?** If it's for personal satisfaction only, that's the only reason you need. But if you would like to publish it, is there a market? Is it

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timely? Does it cover new ground or deal with an issue or situation in a new way? Has the story been told already?

Many, perhaps most, of the ideas we have won't end up as stories. But they make us think, keep our minds open to possibilities, and help develop our instincts as writers. By asking ourselves these questions, by scrutinizing our ideas and examining our motives and abilities, we can better decide which ones will evolve into the best things we can write.

**Do it!** Make a list of five ideas you'd like to write about. Then apply the above criteria. Are they ready to evolve into stories for you?

## **Revealing Character (*From Chapter 2 – Writing*)**

The characters in your fiction are the pivot around which all the rest of your story revolves. Readers want characters to love, to hate, to wonder about, and, perhaps most importantly, to understand by the time the story ends. How do you reveal characters that readers can't wait to learn more about?

**1. Through their actions:** We make many of our everyday judgements about people based on what they do, and there is no-one to explain to us if we're right or wrong. Giving your characters revealing actions is a very realistic method of portraying them. You don't need to add an explanation. If you're using the right kind of actions, they will speak for themselves, and your readers will appreciate being allowed to draw their own conclusions

**2. Through their words:** Not only **what** a character says, but **how** he or she says it—word choice, diction, and attitude—affects the judgements the reader is constantly making about the character. Remember that not all of your characters will sound the same or use the same jargon or slang. A character's voice can be one of the most strongly identifying things about him or her.

**3. Through their background:** Don't do it in expository lumps, where you dump a long narrative passage about the character's past. Instead weave interesting tidbits of information into conversation, interior monologue or short narrative comments. Know your characters' backgrounds intimately before you start to write about them, and keep learning as your story develops. You don't need to include every detail in your story, but having them in your head will help you keep your characters acting in realistic and believable ways.

**4. Through their habits:** We all have them, and what do they say about us? She scours the bathroom with bleach twice a day. He keeps his briefcase locked even

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at home. These little quirks and idiosyncrasies add depth and authenticity to your characters. What conclusions will your readers draw? What do you want them to think?

**5. Through their abilities & tastes:** What characters do and like has a strong effect on what we feel about them. In real life we are often drawn to those who share interests, but we can also be fascinated by someone who does something extraordinary. Keep these factors in mind when developing and revealing your characters.

Remember, characters are supposed to be real people, with believable traits and personalities that will be revealed through your writing, and most readers love the thrill of feeling that they have **discovered** something about a character. Use all of these methods to make your story people live on the page.

**Do it!** Write a 250-word character sketch employing as many of the above techniques as possible.

## **Choosing Words With Care (*From Chapter 3 – Grammar*)**

This section could also be titled "Seven Steps to Style," but the word "style" inspires fear in many writers, especially new writers. Style is considered an abstract concept, an unknowable and unlearnable something that successful writers have and failed writers don't. It's a new writer's bogeyman.

Style is not really so scary. It's only the way in which you choose your words and put them together in your writing. If you write a little, you probably don't have a personal style; if you write a lot, you can't help but have one. Your writing style and the words you choose develop and grow only through practice, but there are some things to consider when choosing those words.

**1. Clarity.** No matter what your style or subject-matter, you want your writing to be clear. This means choosing your words for precision. The best word is the one that conveys exactly the meaning you want.

**2. Brevity.** Most writers must work hard to keep their writing within certain word limits, and clarity and brevity go hand in hand. Short, clear sentences impart information cleanly and smoothly.

**3. Ease.** In the best writing, words flow together in such a way that there are no mental stumbles, stutters, or other obstacles to comprehension. Choose words

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that complement each other naturally, not ones that seem to be jammed into a sentence by force. Read aloud to check for smooth flow.

**4. Emotion.** Don't hesitate to use words and images that convey strong character emotions and evoke emotions in your readers. Don't avoid scenes that are emotionally charged and difficult to write. We want writing that will touch us, so use emotion to bring your characters and your writing to life.

**5. Sense.** Everything we experience comes to us through our five senses. Make certain your characters use theirs, and use words that appeal to and stimulate the senses of your readers.

**6. Correctness.** Words are your raw materials; everything you create as a writer comes from them. Do all you can to increase your knowledge of words so that you can always use them correctly and have the one you need at your fingertips.

**7. Simplicity.** The best way to say something is usually the simplest one. Use a thesaurus by all means, but use it to find the words that pin down exactly what you mean, not the ones that say it in the most unusual way.

Your personal style is just that—personal. No-one else can tell you what it should be or how to attain it. But by keeping these seven points in mind when you write and edit, you can help make sure that your style—whatever it turns out to be—provides a strong foundation for everything you write.

**Do it!** Read a page or two written by an author whose style you admire. Can you find instances of these seven style concepts? Now read a section of your own work. How does it compare?

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