

## SEVEN THINGS THAT CAN SABOTAGE GOOD WRITING

By Dr. Lin Stepp

We all want to create wonderful books, right? And we all want to avoid things that could negatively affect our writing. Yet, sometimes we sabotage our own possibilities for having good writing by a number of factors. In a sense, we sabotage our own future – and our own possibilities for success. According to Sherri Zapelli, author of *Sabotage to Success*, self sabotage includes any acts we engage in that either consciously or unconsciously hinder our efforts or block our own success. The key to changing any type of self-sabotaging behavior is awareness. We must become aware of the ways we utilize self-sabotaging techniques – and then work to stop self sabotage before we engage in it.

In my journey as a writer, creating fiction and non-fiction works, and as a professor, teaching research writing and guiding students through subject papers in other classes, I've begun to see factors that consistently sabotage what might otherwise be good writing results. In examining what other experts in the field of creative writing had to say in this area, I also found these same issues appearing in advice books and articles again and again. So – in this article I've addressed seven of the main problems that can sabotage effective writing. My advice is to think about each of these carefully and to examine how they might be sabotaging your own work and progress.

### (1) LACK OF ADEQUATE PLANNING

A well-known editor, Alan Rizler, said that inadequate planning often is a key factor behind the success of successful writers he has worked with. He wrote, "The finest writers I've worked with, including best-selling literary stars, begin with a clear chapter-by-chapter structure that gives them a preliminary map of the steps along the way towards climax and closure." Rizler says the structured plan may shift as a writer moves along – but held that the original map can be a writer's best friend. An interesting point Rizler made was that "the inability to finish a book can often be traced back to a lack of adequate initial planning." Writers start with a plot and book idea, write with enthusiasm for a time and then fizzle out. Author Phyllis Whitney wrote: "The more preparation you do, the better the writing will be when you finally write the story."

### (2) WEAK CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Writer Jacqui Bianchi said that "the start of every story is the characters themselves... You have to visualize them so clearly that they become independent people." This character development means developing your hero and heroine – and your secondary characters – to such a degree that you know them like real people in your life. You should be able to describe everything about them – their looks, personality, past, friends, school and work history, where they were raised, how much they have traveled, their experiences, their strengths and weaknesses – with consummate ease. Many books fail because the characters don't seem to come alive on the pages – often because they were poorly developed before the book began. Maggie Osborne wrote that 'unless the characters are fully developed – and are characters the reader can care about – the work is unlikely to be memorable.'

### (3) BOUNCING, UNCLEAR POINT OF VIEW

Point of view (POV) is the person from whose perspective the story is viewed. Generally in romance books, the point of view is narrated in third person with either a single perspective given – the heroine’s – or an alternating perspective given – the hero and heroine’s. Marissa de Zavala stressed that ‘through the eyes of the heroine we see the central drama of her heart’s experience’. Her view and perceptions are critical. In most popular romances, the hero’s perspective is given, too. It is important that an alternating point of view follow a pattern the reader can feel comfortable with. Usually, this is either with an ongoing, back-and-forth point of view between hero and heroine – as Nora Roberts writes so skillfully – or with an alternating point of view from chapter to chapter, moving from his to her perspective with each new chapter – like Jane Ann Krentz pens so well. Writers need to find the method that works best for them. What is confusing is popping in other characters’ points of view - who are not the hero or heroine – confusing the reader, or in not making it clear to the reader who is speaking or thinking. Many works are sabotaged with bouncing point of view or unclear perspective that makes the reader stop and wonder whose perspective is being presented.

### (4) PROBLEMATIC NARRATION

Narrative is the story of a novel and narrative mode is the set of methods an author uses to create the story or narrative. William Zinser, says we often forget the importance of narrative – or good story telling. He calls narrative “the oldest and most compelling method of holding someone’s attention” – and there’s the key. Without a good story, well told, there won’t be a good book. Every scene, piece of dialog, or happening must move the story forward and keep the reader engaged and involved. George Angus wrote that “smooth narration is one of the hardest skills for an aspiring writer to master.” A key is to tell “just enough but not too much” – and not to bore the reader with too much unneeded information. In addition, many stories are hindered by inaccuracy – in grammar, consistency of names, personalities, time, facts. Romance writer Lois Walker says narrative gives background information, describes the scenery, and shares secrets with the reader. It also serves as a method to carry readers from one time and place to another. She stresses that “the writer must be careful in balancing the use of dialogue with narrative.” Too much description of surroundings or background information will cause impatient readers to lose interest and begin to skim, looking for some more action.

### (5) BORING, UNREALISTIC DIALOG

Telling a fact in narrative is not nearly as effective as letting a character’s voice show it. Good dialog makes a novel sing – and holds the reader’s attention. Many novels are sabotaged by boring, unrealistic dialog – by conversation that doesn’t ring true to the book’s characters or to the setting and time period of the novel. Author Ginger Chambers wrote: “To a great many people ... dialogue is a major stumbling point....Telling a story in its narrative form is easy for them, but when it comes time for a character to speak, they freeze.” Writers often don’t let the character’s voice come through naturally. Dialog feels contrived, unnatural – or authors impose their own voice into the characters, making the different voices too similar. A key problem here is in not knowing the characters well before the writing begins ... and, then, in simply not relaxing and letting the characters talk as the writer knows they normally would. Ginny Wiehardt said that

“nothing puts the reader out of a story faster than bad dialog.” Dialog should be natural and read like real speech. Writers should also strive to alternate attributions - descriptor beats and speaker tags - so that neither is overdone or intrudes in the ongoing dialog. The best advice by many experts is to write dialog freely and to read dialog out loud after it is written to see if it feels and sounds right for the story.

#### (6) UNCLEAR VOICE

Editor Alan Rinzler stresses that “voice is what give writing energy, authenticity ... it animates the narrator and characters with a unique personality. It grabs your attention and keeps you turning the page.” Too many writers are trying to write like someone else or trying to write to please someone else. In result, their work loses its individual sparkle. Rinzler says successful writers “have a voice that reflects who they are and reflects the voice of their characters.” All good writers have a strong voice that comes through loud and clear in their work. Striving to please friends, critique group members, the market, or what a writer perceives is wanted by someone else is a quick way to lose personal voice. As psychiatrist Dr. Lonnie MacDonald affirms “Creative writers are most successful when they are simply being themselves.” He believes writers must tap their own individuality – and must believe that they are special, unique, and have something to say. “To know thyself”, according to McDonald, “is the most important step to improving your writing.” The better a writer knows themselves, the more confidence they have in themselves and the better drawn their heroine and hero will be.

#### (7) UNRESOLVED PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES

The concept of “knowing thyself” leads readily to the last issue of self-sabotage – an author’s own personal unresolved psychological issues. Nothing can sabotage the dreams to write – or the ongoing writing life – more than an author’s own, unresolved problems. As McDonald states, these can include problems with procrastination, self-discipline, time management, negative attitudes and feelings, excuses or justifications for poor progress, and other blocks and inhibitions to working with disciplined focus and regularity. Diana Brown, regency writer, said “there is nothing sadder or more unsalable than an unfinished manuscript.” This is the one area that all the advice articles, craft books, writing groups and conferences cannot fix. Until you give yourself permission to succeed and to do what is necessary to write with regularity and discipline – your dreams of publication will continue to be sabotaged.

In conclusion, the ways writers self-sabotage their writing and personal writing life are often not well-analyzed. As Zappelli says “what is familiar is comfortable, even if it’s unhealthy or self-defeating.” We often don’t like change – or even like to examine the possibility of change. More often, writers, and wannabe writers, are seeking affirmation to continue in the methods and manner they’ve become familiar with – even if those methods aren’t getting them where they want to go. If editors, successful writers, psychologists and psychiatrists all suggest that these seven areas are often problem areas for most writers ... it would probably be a good thing to carefully consider each of these factors to see how they might be affecting our own production and success.

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