

All You Need is a Six-Pack

Workshop

1. Opening questions:

- a. How many of you are Plotters?
- b. How many of you are Pantsers?
- c. How many of you are Jigsaw Writers?
- d. How many of you are Pick 'n Mixers?
- e. How many of you change what you do from book to book?
- f. How many of you try to implement just about everything you learn from a craft book or workshop?
- g. How many of you are scared you're doing it all wrong?

2. Relax – you're not alone.

- a. There is a continuum from Plotter to Pantser and many of us sit somewhere along it – and that can vary from book to book.
- b. Lisa Gardner at last year's RWA National Conference – part of our growth as writers is discovering what your writing process is.
Nora Roberts is a strong believer in doing what works for you – she who has apparently never read a craft book or attended a craft workshop.
Susan Elizabeth Phillips - attend workshops and read craft books, learn, but only do what doesn't give you a twisty feeling in your stomach.
- c. Your process can vary from book to book - depending on what your needs are and what your books' needs are.
- d. I would add that as you grow, and as you learn (through books, workshops or your own writing), you need to hone your process – to give you confidence that you have what you need to write (but I give no guarantees that your writing will be good!)

3. Writing journey

All writers need to pack what they feel they will need on their writing journey and which will help them to get the most out of that journey.

It's like travelling for real. Plotters plan meticulously and have every detail mapped out. They want to ensure they get the best value for money and time - seeing and experiencing everything the destination has to offer. Pantsers choose their destination on a whim and turn up ready to take it as they find it. They explore, free from preconceived plans, hoping to discover the hidden wonder.

Pick 'n' mixer will do a bit of both - choose their destination with purpose and research what is there - but their plan consists only of things they want to do and

might like to do rather than a detailed timetable of events. This gives flexibility to experience the unexpected with a safety net ie a bed for the night!

As you travel more and gain confidence – your method will change. You may be more willing to ‘pants’ it or, if your destination is one which you are nervous about, you may ‘plot’ it. And if things happen to you, like you get mugged in Barcelona, that will change how you view things and your preparations too.

4. Even when travelling, I’m more of a Pick ‘n’ Mixer!
As a writer, I’m the same. To start a new story I need enough of a plan to get started and know where I’m going, but the freedom to tell my story as it emerges. I don’t want to panic that I’ll freeze with no earthly idea how to get through chapter or what comes next. Equally I don’t want to panic when a character throws something at me I’m not expecting. Or if an idea occurs to me that will take my story to a higher level. But that doesn’t mean I use exactly the same process with each book. As I said, some tools work for some books and some for others. The key is to be able to adapt with each book.
5. Many of us as we begin to write read every craft book we can get our hands on and go to numerous workshops given by experienced authors. Some of what we hear will resonate with us and give us that a-ha moment. Some will fill us with a sense of fear and dread. At times we feel overwhelmed by all the things we must do or not do. We often run from pillar to post trying it all out and our writing begins to go round in circles. Slowly we begin to weed out anything which doesn’t work and relax enough to enjoy writing again. Still we feel guilty that somehow we’re not doing it right.

It’s okay. Not everything works for everybody ... or writing truly would be a matter of learning the process and banging out the book.

Do your homework, read the books, attend as many workshops as you can and learn, learn, learn. Also talk to your writer friends - they are a great resource! But be discerning and be prepared to trust your gut instinct. If something sounds like it might work for you – give it a go. If that churning feeling starts in your stomach, move on.

6. So where does the six-pack come in? (pics of six-packs?)
Those of you who have been writing for a while probably have a bank of tools which you use before you begin to write. But, you may say (and I have) it’s only a bit of this and a bit of that. I’m here to tell you it isn’t. Trust in your collection of tools - use them, refine them and keep learning. And be assured that not only is **your** collection of tools acceptable, it is invaluable because it helps **you** to be more organised. It’s that organisation which gives you the freedom to explore your story.
Note I do not guarantee that these tools will guarantee you will write a great story that sells ... but they sure can help!

7. The tools **you** need for **your** writing journey. It's your top six writing tools. It's your way of knowing that you have your passport, tickets, hotel reservations and credit cards (and maybe that guidebook, so that if all else fails – you can go shopping). In other words, it's your safety net.

I'm going to talk both generally about what should be in your six-pack and specifically about some of the things I have in mine. None of it is new or different, but hopefully some of you may get that a-ha moment which gives you the confidence in your own six-pack. Remember to be flexible – none of these once done has to remain inviolate until you've typed The End. It is okay for them to evolve.

7. What should be in the **six-pack**?

- Character tools eg Debra Dixon's GMC charts, Character interviews/bios, character information sheets, character grids, collages, enneagrams, archetypes etc.
 - Why? Build interesting, 3-d characters with depth that can show growth through the story. Also characters who can react with and respond to each other. Important for readers to identify with your characters and to empathise with your hero and heroine (and villain). It's what editors and agents want!
- Plot tools/ Story flow tools eg Debra Dixon's GMC, W-Plot, plot outlines, plotting grids, 12-point story outline, Snowflakes, Hero's Journey, Carolyn Greene's Plot Doctor, Robin Perrini's Story Magic NB These also help with revision and editing!
 - Why? Help build a sustainable, credible, multi-layered story that is appropriate to the characters. Helps with story flow, demonstrating character growth and showing issues and resolutions (beware not to have a stack of problems for the sake of it - escalating tension not bad luck!)
- Blurb eg Panic Free Pitching by Anna Sugden. Also check out Suzanne McMinn's wonderful blurb handouts on www.suzannemcminn.com
 - Why? Short, snappy way to give information about your characters (interesting, appealing, GMC), plot (is there one? Is it credible, sustainable, interesting etc etc) Is there romance in your story? Is there conflict?
- Back-story Dump
 - Why? Get it all out! Avoid slipping lots of it into the first chapter. Refine character details, ensure GMC is credible and can evolve. Helps with depth, layering and additional facets.

- Idea Generation eg Brainstorm, mindmaps, collages, character interviews.
 - Why? What to do if you're stuck, need to take your story to the next level, you get revisions which are broad rather than specific, you need red herrings or story twists, you're beginning a story and only have a rough idea or your CP's nix your ideas. (show eg for Gay by Day)
- Research Do it up-front. Ask questions. Ask experts - don't just rely on Google or books. Be accurate. Use it sparingly for flavour and colour.
 - Why? Romance is a huge market with knowledgeable readers. Poor research can turn off a reader. Can help you add depth, layering or different facets to your story. (give eg of Cary Grant)

8. Summary

- a. It's okay to have your own writing process and it's okay that it's different from everyone else's – as long as it works for you and for the book you're writing at the moment
- b. Allow your process to evolve – learn, develop, adapt
- c. Be prepared to listen to your gut about new tools.
- d. Give your tools the respect they deserve! Consider what's in your six pack
- e. Write! Nothing works better than completing a ms and typing The End.