

The Art of Layering: From First Draft to Final Manuscript

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The **first draft** is what many authors consider the hardest part of writing a novel. The common saying goes something like this: Nothing's worse than a blank page. I am in full agreement. A blank page is just so...blank. Consequently, getting that first draft onto that blank page is nothing more than getting words on paper. After all, words can be fixed. Sentences can be rearranged and/or deleted. That's what the second draft is for. Right?

Sort of.

You see, I've also heard it argued that the first draft is where all the creativity takes place. This argument goes something like this: The first draft is where all the fun is; it's where the characters and storyline begin to take shape. Again, I agree with this theory—in part. However, I also believe one of the most creative aspects of putting a novel together comes in the later stages. The third, fourth or even tenth draft. This process is what I call **layering**.

Layering is both an art form and a skill. It is a process, a process that can be learned and honed. Please note: Other than the first step there is no specific order to the rest of the steps. Also, not every scene will have (or need) step two -- eight. The decision to use one or all of the steps in the layering process is where the "art" of this process comes in.

Step One: WRITE THE FIRST DRAFT

This step is obvious. You can't begin the layering process unless you have a first draft. But please note, I am not telling you one way is better than the other. This first draft can either be a draft of a scene, chapter, section, or the complete novel. Do what works for you.

Step Two: LAYER MOVEMENT INTO EACH SCENE

This step is what I call: **NO TALKING HEADS**. Your characters must be moving around. They must be doing something. Stationary people do not exist in the real world, nor should they exist in a scene. Here are some examples.

OKAY:

"Miss Jane, all is not lost."

She gave him a ragged, quivering sigh.

"You may still survive if you turn from this life forever," he offered. "We could leave for Colorado Springs this afternoon."

"No." A slow, harsh breath wheezed out of her. "It's too late."

BETTER:

He lifted a skinny, limp hand into his, closed his fingers over the pale, graying skin. “Miss Jane, all is not lost.”

She gave him a ragged, quivering sigh.

With his own answering sigh, he released her hand and brought a glass of water to her cracked lips. He lifted her shoulders with one hand and helped her navigate the glass with the other. “You may still survive if you turn from this life forever. We could leave for Colorado Springs this afternoon.”

Jane took a slow, choking sip, and then leaned back. “No.” A slow, harsh breath wheezed out of her. “It’s too late.”

Step Three: LAYER THE FIVE SENSES INTO EACH SCENE

Although most of us tend to be visual by nature we live life in a three-dimensional world. We experience the world around us with all five senses. Smells have a powerful pull over our memory. As do songs. How many times have you heard a song from your childhood and was instantly transported to another time and place. Here are some examples of how to layer in the senses (other than sight)

OKAY: Hannah stopped talking the moment the curtain began rising in front of her. Conversation among the rest of the cast halted as well. The audience leaned forward, showing their approval with their applause.

BETTER: A groan from the rigging stopped Hannah in mid-sentence and had her turning toward the curtain to fulfill their final duty of the night. Conversation among the rest of the cast halted as well. A few more seconds of rope grinding to metal and the curtain began to rise. The audience leaned forward, eager to get a better look at the actors. With every inch of the curtain’s ascent, their palms pounded wildly together, again and again and again. Louder and louder and louder.

Step Four: LAYER THE SETTING INTO EACH SCENE

Setting is very important in commercial fiction. After all, our books aren’t just competing with one another they’re competing with the television and movies. Think of this step as an opportunity to transport your character into your story world. An example:

OKAY: The pink house was a typical Victorian house, or what some called a Painted Lady.

BETTER: If houses had gender, this one was surely female. Elegant, whimsical, the two-story building was made of rose-colored stone. The bold lines of the roof were softened by rounded windows and sweeping vines. On closer inspection the house looked a bit neglected, the twisting wisteria covered a few sags and wrinkles that made the building look like a woman refusing to accept her age.

Step Five: LAYER EMOTION INTO EACH SCENE

Emotion is an important aspect of commercial fiction, especially romance. Your reader wants to “feel” what the characters are feeling. Your reader wants to experience the story first hand. By adding in emotion you can give the reader a stronger, richer experience. Think of it this way. A photograph of a firefighter running out of a burning building with a child in his arms is a powerful, heart-wrenching image on its own. But what if the caption read: Firefighter rescues his own child. Here’s another example:

OKAY:

Beau pressed a white cloth against Jane’s mouth. After the bout of coughing ceased, he pulled back the cloth now filled with the red stain of blood.
Blood from her damaged lungs.
If only she would accept his charity.

BETTER:

Beau pressed a white cloth against Jane’s mouth, afraid each cough wrenching through her fragile body would tear her flesh from the bone. After the bout ceased, he pulled back the cloth now filled with the red stain of blood.
Blood from her damaged lungs.
Beau’s heart pounded with so much anguish for her, for what she’d become, he thought he might choke from it. Jane Goodwin had chosen to earn her money in the most hideous way imaginable. It hurt to see how far she’d fallen.
A shudder racked through him. If only she would accept his charity.

Step Six: LAYER DIALOGUE INTO EACH SCENE

Make sure your dialogue rings true. Does the heroine’s speech sound unique to her? Is that the way a man would talk? Is that the way a man in the nineteenth century would talk? Are your characters talking in fragments? Are they cutting each other off every once and a while? An example:

OKAY:

“Calm yourself,” Marc said. “You will not help her with this unfortunate display.”
“It is not like that,” Logan said.
“It is always like that,” Marc returned.
Logan’s lip curled into a snarl. “She looked so lost.”
“She is too young for you,” Marc snapped.

BETTER:

“Calm yourself,” Marc said. “You can’t do anything to help her right now. And if you try to touch her again, even in the guise of helping her mourn, I’ll do more than dodge your punches. I’ll throw a few of my own.”

“It’s not like that.” Logan fairly spit out the words.

“It’s always like that,” Marc replied just as forceful.

Struggling under his grip, Logan curled his lip into a snarl. “I was just...she and I were...that is, she looked so... lost.”

Marc blew out a hiss. “She’s too young for you.”

Step Seven: LAYER BACKSTORY INTO EACH SCENE VERY CAREFULLY

The best way to avoid backstory dump is to make sure your addressing all of the other elements we’re discussing here. In other words, if you have paragraph after paragraph of narrative you’re probably heading down the wrong path. Look at this way. Your reader is on a need to know basis. **ONLY** give the reader what is absolutely essential information. Do we really need to know that Aunt Bessie liked to make apple pies and those pies were your heroines very most favorite? Only if it pertains to the scene.

Step Eight: LAYER SEXUAL TENSION INTO EACH SCENE

In a romance, this step ties closely to step five. No matter what level of sensuality you put into your novel, this is an important step in creating a believability factor for the happily-ever-after ending. If you skip this step you in a sexy novel the reader won’t believe the hero and heroine will stick together once the “lust” wears off. Conversely, if you skip this step in a sweet romance the reader won’t believe the hero and heroine are compatible.

OKAY:

Her body reacted with a wave of hot thrill at the sight of the naval officer in his flawless uniform. He looked like a dangerous cat hunting for prey. Was he here to find a woman to bed?

She hoped so.

Look at me, she silently ordered.

He turned and their gazes locked. Giving her a wicked smile, he took one, slow deliberate step toward her.

She took an equally slow, deliberate step toward him.

He took another forward.

And so the hunt began.

But who would win this game? Both, if she had her way. And Aurora always had her way.

BETTER:

In spite of the flawless uniform, a shocking air of wildness resonated out of him and called to her. With his dark, golden hair tied in a queue and harshly chiseled features, he looked like a very beautiful, very dangerous cat hunting for prey.

He surveyed his surroundings with meticulous care, checking faces only. Was he looking for a lost servant? A friend or family member in trouble?

A woman to bed?

Her body reacted with a wave of hot thrill at that last prospect. Meeting such a man on the London Docks, where the familiar rules of society didn't exist, could be a dangerous adventure. If only she could see his eyes, she would know more about the man's character.

Look at me, she silently ordered.

As though hearing her call, his head turned in her direction. Their gazes met, locked and held.

His eyes revealed nothing.

Frozen in place, Aurora couldn't look away, didn't want to look away. As he continued to hold her in his stare, her stomach clenched and tied into a tight, painful knot.

She'd never met a man so hard to read. His eyes were a fathomless pool of blank emotion, except for a flicker of ... what? What was it she saw in that instant? Need? Hurt? Loneliness?

He gave one, hard blink and the moment was lost.

If she hadn't seen that small flash of emotion, she might have considered running for home.

Instead, she held her ground.

He took one, slow deliberate step toward her.

She relented, just a bit, with a step back.

He took another forward.

She, another back.

And so the hunt began.

A final note about layering: If you have a scene that doesn't seem to be working the reason could have something to do with the above steps. Go back through the scene and see if any of the above steps are missing. The more you layer into each scene the richer the story will be.

*Renee Ryan writes for Love Inspired Historicals. Her fabulous editor is Melissa Endlich of Steeple Hill. Her first book in the Charity House series, **The Marshall Takes a Bride** was a February 2009 release. Her next book in the series, **Hannah's Beau**, hit the shelves July 2009. For further information about Renee's upcoming books check out www.ReneeRyan.com*

