

Concept Discussions

By Holly Lisle

This is more of an “I’ve already published a few books and now I’ve sold one on an outline and a sample chapter” sort of section, but sequentially, this is the point where the process takes place, so let’s go through how it works.

NOTE: I have done this many times, it can be grueling, it can beat your ego into pulp, and you have to be good at it or you will find yourself making enemies where you need allies.

Here’s the scene. Your editor calls you on the phone, (or sends you a letter) and says she likes the look of your book outline and sample chapters overall, but she sees some areas where the story could be stronger, and some where it could be shorter, and she has a problem with the motivations of some of the characters, and so on. Hope that she sends you a letter first, because you will deal with this so much better if you don’t have to deal with your first reactions while on the phone.

But let’s say you do. Worst case, she calls you cold. You thought when you sold the book on the basis of the outline that the outline must have been exactly what she wanted or she wouldn’t have bought it. You, after all, thought it was perfect. Now you’re finding out for the first time that while she wants the book, she doesn’t want it precisely as you envisioned it.

Here are the rules when you’re discussing concepts.

Rule #1: Shut mouth, open ears. Tell your editor you want to write down everything she has to say, grab a notebook and a pen, and carefully write it all down. At this point, it doesn’t matter whether you agree or disagree with her remarks—we’ll assume for convenience’s sake that you have the

typical writer ego and you're certain she's out of her mind. Write everything down anyway. Don't say a word, unless it is, "I missed that last little bit, could you repeat it?" Don't defend your concepts, don't defend your characters, don't defend yourself. Shut up, write.

Rule #2: Get immediate distance. When she finishes telling you everything that needs to be changed, and when you've gone over what you've written down once to make sure that what she said is what you heard, say, "Okay, this is a lot to go over. I'm going to have to study what I've done and see how I can work these changes in. When can I call you back to discuss it?" Get a date, smile and say bye, hang up. Memorize this step and practice it front of the mirror, imagining that you are foaming at the mouth while saying these words. Practice sounding both calm and rational. You probably won't be when the time comes—that's why you're practicing.

Rule #3: Hit the roof in private. Anything you say when no one can hear you can't be held against you. You're off the phone, you're alone in the bathroom, you've finished beating your head on the wall. Now is the time to scream and snarl and make comments on your editor's parents' species and marital status, your editor's IQ and sexual practices, and anything else you're inclined to shout when really angry. Or, if you're of a tenderer disposition, now's your chance to bask in self-pity and sing three quick verses of "Nobody Likes Me, Everybody Hates Me, Guess I'll Go Eat Worms." You're permitted anything from ten minutes to twenty-four hours for this phase. Get it out of your system, then knock it off.

Rule #4: Lock your ego in the closet. Time to get back to work. The truth frequently hurts, and it's about to bite you in the tender spots. You're about to discover that the reason your editor has her job is because she's good at it. Go over your outline, synopsis, and completed chapters with her comments in hand, look carefully at each one she's made, and honestly try to figure out why she said what she did. Run the

story in your head with her changes in place. You're going to realize that if you put most of her suggestions into practice, it will actually get better. Most times, a whole bunch better.

You'll also discover a few things that she suggested that won't work, but this will usually be because what you have down on the outline she bought is only a very small part of what you already have in your head. When you come across one of these exceptions, write down your reasons for wanting to keep the item as it was, and make sure that they're good reasons, and that the item will make the story better. Figure out how you're going to incorporate the changes your editor was right about, too, and give yourself a few notes on each so that you won't forget how you're going to do it all when you're on the phone talking to her; otherwise you could end up sounding lost or not too bright or like you've been hitting the sauce.

I'm as defensive as anyone about my writing—probably worse than most. I have a quick temper, too, and my first reaction to criticism is to attack. If that were the reaction I ever let get the upper hand, I would have a miserable time dealing with my editors, and I would have a short and unhappy career. I am pleased to report that I've never blown up at an editor, I've never let my mouth get away from me, and I've always been able to see (once I've had the time to calm down) how much my editors' initial suggestions would improve my stories. And because I've taken the time to find out where each editor was right and figured out how I was going to make the changes she wanted, when I hit an area that I felt was important to keep as it was, I've always been able to get the okay to let it stand.

Writing professionally requires mastery of the art of negotiation. Never forget that.

First Draft, First Look

n_how_to

Contents © Holly Lisle. <https://hollylisle.com> All Rights Reserved