

Writing Quality Fiction Transcript

This is a transcript of the seminar, edited slightly for easy reading.

You can find the audio version at www.writershuddle.com/seminars/july2014.

Hi, I'm Ali Luke, and this is the July seminar for Writers' Huddle, Writing Quality Fiction.

I've chosen this as a topic, partly inspired by a talk I went to at the Winchester Writers' Festival by Jasper Fforde, who's one of my favourite authors. I actually disagreed with a lot of what he said in his talk – but the gist of it, the underlying point, I *did* agree with.

And that was that readers deserve good quality fiction – and that as a writer, the books you produce really do need to be quality, especially if you're publishing independently, so if you're self-publishing it as an ebook or a print on demand book, because you don't have to go through agents and publishers and so on. They are in some ways gatekeepers who are there to (hopefully!) assure the quality of the fiction that's being published.

What's "Quality Fiction"?

I want to start by clarifying what I mean – and what I think Jasper Fforde meant, and what most people would mean – by "quality fiction". I certainly don't mean "literary fiction". I don't mean that this is the sort of fiction that wins the Booker prize, or the sort of fiction that you would study on a university course in English literature.

Obviously there's lots of quality fiction that fits those definitions too, but I think it's much broader than that.

Quality fiction is about, as a reader, feeling fully confident in the author's ability to tell the story – both in terms of their plotting and their

characterisation and the bigger picture things, but also in terms of their word choices, their sentence structures, their pacing, just the way everything is put together.

Quality Fiction vs Quality Non-Fiction

I think this type of quality is a lot harder to achieve in fiction than in non-fiction. I've done quite a bit of fiction-writing and quite a bit of non-fiction writing, and I can tell you that (certainly for me!) it's far easier to produce a competent piece of non-fiction – perhaps a blog post that's perfectly good enough that I can get paid for it – than to produce fiction that's good quality.

With non-fiction, generally what people are interested in is getting some information, so it's a how-to article on a particular topic, or maybe being entertained, but even then the entertainment might be more about some celebrity news or something about a film that's coming out, or it's a bunch of gifs on BuzzFeed with a few captions. The writing itself doesn't have to be amazing, but the piece can still work perfectly well.

In fiction, because you're immersing yourself in an imaginary world, it doesn't take much to jolt you out of that world and break the flow of the reading experience. So if an author uses a word that doesn't actually mean quite what they think it means, or if they have a sentence that you need to read three times to understand what's going on, or if they over-explain a joke or a point ... it just jars you a little bit and makes you not fully confident in the writing. When that happens, you can't completely relax and enjoy the story.

What Quality Looks Like

In practice, I think this means knowing your craft really well: being competent with the nuts and bolts of writing. Being able to develop engaging, interesting characters. Being able to put together a plot that works, and you don't just have wild coincidences tying everything together.

At a really basic level, it could just mean a lack of typos and grammatical errors, and that is an issue with some self-published fiction. I feel that self-publishers in general are really committed to quality, and many people,

including me, will pay for editing. Lots of people also give their book to beta-readers before they publish it.

So I don't think that typos and those minor mistakes are rife, and certainly I've seen typos in professionally published books (both fiction and nonfiction) and it's not the absolute end of the world. But if a book is riddled with mistakes, it's going to be tough for the reader to feel that's a quality narrative. Plus, something that's full of typos is likely to have other problems too.

There's a slightly higher level than "typos" to consider, when it comes to words and sentences. **For me, this is about a certain fluidity and grace within the writing itself.** It's about having sentences that sound right. This can simply mean fixing some quite basic stuff that it's easy for a workshop group to pick up. For instance, if you've used the same word several times within several sentences, it tends to jar and look a bit weird without a clear reason for that repetition.

Some words, it's fine to repeat: words like *the*, *said*, *he*, *she* – they're inevitably going to come up a lot. But if you constantly repeat a particular word or phrase like "the table" several times within a paragraph, it ends up looking slightly clumsy.

So that's just one basic thing to watch out for. There are lots of other things that can just knock your writing, and I'll come onto some of these in a minute. Things like using a lot of clichés, or having lots of long, convoluted sentences that don't quite work.

This isn't about writing beautiful prose that could be, as I say, analysed on a university course or that would qualify you for the Booker prize. Obviously there are some authors who do write outstandingly beautiful stories in a variety of ways and genres. One of my favourites is Margaret Atwood, and I read her largely because I love her writing style. It's lyrical, it's very engaging, it's rich – I really enjoy it.

But there are plenty of other authors I enjoy where, frankly, their writing style is almost beside the point. What I really love is their characters and their story and so on. They're certainly very good writers, they're producing quality fiction, but I almost don't notice the words – I'm just caught up in the story.

For a lot of commercial or genre writers, that's what you're aiming for. **You want readers not to be tripped up by your words, but just to get the story.**

Boosting the Quality of Your Fiction: Seven Practical Tips

There's no one way to do quality fiction, by any means, but there are some things you can use to help you and some things you might want to consider particularly when you're editing.

I don't think it's a good idea to worry about most of this in your first draft. My first drafts are embarrassingly bad when I'm writing fiction, and sometimes you just have to try to get the story down as best as you can in the heat of the moment of composition.

It doesn't matter if you're using some clichés or some repetitive phrases or the dialogue is a bit stilted or the body language isn't quite there or whatever – you can go back and fix it.

But definitely when you edit, you need to pay attention to things that will help lift your fiction to the level where it's truly good quality.

Tip #1: Avoid Using the Same (or a Very Similar) Word Twice Within a Sentence or Paragraph

This is sometimes hard to spot in your own work. Reading it aloud can help, as I've found when I've been reading to workshop groups – somehow, all the mistakes just leap out at me before anyone gets a chance to comment!

Getting other people to read through it is a great idea; it's often easier for them to spot the repeated words. I was reading a friend's work for a workshop recently, and she'd used the phrase "mug cupboard" three times within a couple of paragraphs. That'd be fine if the mug cupboard was going to become vital to the plot, but I don't think it is. I think she was just writing a draft and it happens!

Tip #2: Be Careful With Tenses – Don't Slip Between Past and Present

This sometimes happens in novels where the author is writing in the past tense but they're referring to something that's presumably ongoing – it could be part of the world for years to come.

I think it's always best to just stick with the past tense. Unless you're giving direct speech or direct thoughts from a character, it doesn't really make sense to switch to present tense.

Some authors will have a whole flashback or a whole chapter opening or something that's separate from the rest of the text in a different tense – that's fine. But do be careful that you're not accidentally or carelessly changing the text.

I've seen this in quite a bit of well-known, published, popular fiction and maybe it's just something that I'm hung up on as a reader – but I do find it awkward when suddenly you're jumped from “everything's past tense” to a bit that's in present tense. I've included an example [in the worksheet \(available here\)](#) so you can see what I mean here.

Tip #3: Don't Use Fancy Synonyms for “Said”

When I was in school, one of the exercises we did in English was to come up with a whole load of alternatives to the word “said” – whispered, muttered, shouted, yelled, hissed, etc.

Maybe that's an interesting exercise in terms of developing your vocabulary when you're a kid, but as a fiction writer, it's worse than useless.

If you just stick to very basic words like “said” when you're presenting dialogue, readers will barely even notice. They just keep going. They're not interested in the word “said”, they're interested in the words that are said.

If you use increasingly complex words, it starts to get distracting and jarring. I'm not saying you can never use a different word – I think it's perfectly appropriate to use, say, the word “whispered” if you want to make it clear that

a character is whispering something. That's fine. But varying it for the sake of variety is a bad idea.

You can start getting into some really intrusively weird words as alternatives to "said." I don't think I've come across any very modern writers using the word "ejaculated" as a synonym for "said" ... but that one is bound to raise a giggle from your reader. There are probably others that just sound so strange in context that it's not worth using them.

As a reader, I find it annoying when someone laughs a sentence. I don't think you can laugh a whole sentence – I don't think you can really laugh a word. And the same goes when someone smiles a sentence. I'm not saying they can't laugh or smile before or after the dialogue, but making as though they somehow smiled a line of dialogue is just weird.

I'm okay with the word "hissed" for dialogue, but some readers will get hung up on that if the line doesn't contain the letter "s", because they're convinced you can't hiss something without an "s" in it.

Really, I would stick with the word "said" and if someone's asking a question, the word "asked." That's it. You don't need much else. Very occasionally, you might need a "whispered" or a "muttered" or a "yelled", but that's rare.

Tip #4: Use the Most Basic Word that Does the Job

This is one of George Orwell's rules for writing – "never use a long word where a short one will do" (and also takes in rule five):

(i) Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.

(ii) Never use a long word where a short one will do.

(iii) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

(iv) Never use the passive where you can use the active.

(v) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

(vi) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

(Taken from his essay [Politics and the English Language](#).)

So, don't write something like *John observed a cow walking down the street* if you just mean *John saw a cow walking down the street*.

The main case when it's okay to use slightly more flowery, Latinate words like that is when it shows something about the viewpoint character. If John is the kind of person who'd tell his friend, "I observed a cow walking down the street," fair enough! It tells us something about John – maybe he's a very precise person, maybe he's a bit of a show-off in his language, whatever the case might be.

In general though, stick with the most normal word – the kind of word you'd use if you were telling the story to a friend.

Obviously there may be cases where a particular word has a particular kind of nuance, and you need to get that subtlety of meaning into a sentence, that's fine – but if you've got the choice between two or three different words and they're basically all going to mean the same thing, just go with the simplest.

Tip #5: Be Alert to How Your Writing Sounds

By this, I mean think about the rhythm of your sentences, the musicality of the language, in a sense. I'm not a particularly musical or aural person. I tend to see what I'm writing rather than listen to the sentences in my head.

But **when you're editing, it's worth trying to make sure that the rhythm of the sentences is working, that it *sounds* right.** This is a hard thing to set rules about. There's no magic formula for making sentences that just sound right. But most of us do have an internal ear that can pick up on this stuff. If you read your work over carefully, particularly if you read aloud, you'll figure out the places where it isn't sounding right.

For an example of where things often sound *wrong*, think of amateur poetry, where people sometimes twist the order of words to fit a rhyme scheme, and it just sounds off and it doesn't fit with the way you'd expect the English language to normally sound.

Tip #6: Trust Your Reader

Readers are, on the whole, a very intelligent bunch of people. They've read lots of books other than yours. They know how books work and in particular, they know how to infer things. They don't have to spell everything out to a reader.

For instance, if you have a character behaving in an angry way, you don't need to tell the reader that this character is a really angry, irritable person. You don't need to have other characters constantly comment on it. You don't have to have long passages of narrative exploring it. The reader will get it.

One of the most frustrating things as a reader is when you've got a joke, or got a point – especially a reasonably subtle one – and suddenly the author beats you over the head with it, and adds in a whole extra sentence to tell you what you've just been shown.

This is something that's much easier to catch in the editing, particularly when you've got other people to tell you. I've been really grateful to my workshop group for pulling me up on times when I've over-explained something. Like, I'll have a character who's obsessed with power and control, and I'll tell you that he's obsessed with power and control – but it's obvious; we know this from his interactions with people, we know it from what he does.

It's possible to go too far the other way and think that the reader will get something when you've actually been a bit *too* subtle. Again, this is something where it's particularly useful to get an outside opinion. What might seem obvious or not obvious to you may be different for your readers.

Tip #7: Be Careful With Similes and Metaphors

This is a tricky one. Some people love to craft these and they can come up with some really interesting and original similes and metaphors, but sometimes these just draw attention to themselves a little bit too much. **They dance onto the page, leap out at the reader, and say "look at me, look at this beautiful piece of writing."**

You have to have a very light hand with them. Make sure that they aren't drawing attention away from your characters and your plot and the actual elements of your story. The exception is, perhaps, if you're writing the sort of

fiction where your writing style and the richness of language is particular important.

Generally, though, it's very easy to slightly hit the wrong note with similes and metaphors. They can come across as a bit overblown. Some readers love them – it maybe depends a bit on your audience.

Again, I would definitely look for some outside feedback on this; ask people to be very honest: *does this metaphor work? Does it jar a bit? Does it seem a little bit intrusive? Is it drawing too much attention?*

You don't want anything in your writing to grab the reader's attention away from the story, even in a good way. Even if they think, "That's a beautiful metaphor." You want everything to stay very in keeping with the viewpoint character, with the world, and not jar in that way.

I do think this is a tricky thing to get right. It does come over time, and as I say, you've got the opportunity to edit – you don't have to get all of this right the first time round, by any means.

Issues of Quality on a Larger Scale

That all relates to your work on a word and sentence level, because this is where quality first shows itself. You can sometimes read the first page – even the first paragraph – of something, and it's clear that the writer just isn't great at doing their job of expressing things well.

Quality also applies on a bigger scale, and you could be a writer who can craft a perfectly good sentence, who can write a whole page or even a whole scene that reads very well. You might be able to get an agent interested on the strength of your first three chapters or something. But, there are bigger issues of quality that run through your entire book.

I'm going to cover three of those, and try to give you a few pointers.

#1: Characterisation

This is something where readers might not spot it as an issue of quality – they might call it something different. But, if you're not able to create engaging, interesting, consistent (to an extent) characters, then readers just won't be that invested in your story.

Frankly, if your characters are boring, if there's no real reason to root for them, if their struggles seem insignificant and so on, then why would someone read about them?

The reason we get caught up in stories and get interested is primarily because we want to find out what happens to the characters. There might be an interesting twisty plot – and particularly if you're writing mystery or crime, say, the plot might be more of a draw than the characters – but generally, we need characters to carry the story.

A couple of things can go wrong here. **One is to shove your characters into the plot and make them do things to fit it, even if those things aren't in-character for them.** So, you might have somebody who's normally very sensible suddenly doing something really stupid – they go back to the haunted house, whatever – because your plot requires it, and you don't give any real explanation about *why* they do so.

Often, this is just a case of taking a step back as a writer and thinking through your character's motivations. There might be a reason they go back to the haunted house that you could quite plausibly put in. Maybe they accidentally left something there that's really important to them. Maybe they think that another character is stuck there. There could be all sorts of reasons why – but if they're somebody who's normally very rational or sensible, you need to show why they don't just go and call the police, or whatever it might be.

Then, the other problem is that sometimes characters just aren't very interesting. I find this an issue with some literary fiction – I don't know why, but some literary authors seem to pick the most dull characters and situations they could possibly write about. Maybe that's because they feel that what's interesting is the quality of the writing and delving into people's minds and

thoughts in great detail. That doesn't do a lot for me. You can certainly write literary fiction and have interesting characters and a good plot, and so on.

Your characters really do need to be engaging. That might mean giving them some backstory – making it feel to the reader like they're real people who have had experiences in the past that still affect them today, and who are going to go on living in the future. (Unless you kill them off during the course of your novel...)

I'm not a big fan of character questionnaires and checklists where you fill in their eye colour and hair colour and when their birthday is and so on – **but I do think it's worth trying to get to know your characters by exploring a bit more about them.** This is something that's probably best done just in the natural course of your writing.

If you've got a character who behaves in a particular way – whether they're someone who's very cynical or very distrustful of others, or they're somebody who's very generous and open-hearted – there are going to be reasons in their background about why they behave that way. It's sometimes worth having a think about what made them who they are, and how that can impinge on your story and your plot and affect them now.

Also, very importantly, how will your characters change over the course of your novel? If you're writing a long detective series or something, you probably don't want your detective changing radically during each book – but if you're writing a stand-alone novel or a trilogy, you do need a "character arc" for your main characters at least.

It could be that somebody who starts out quite shy and timid finds their confidence. It could be that someone who starts out very arrogant and stand-offish is humbled a bit and maybe better able to connect to people – and happier as a result. **There are lots of things that could happen in a character arc, but the key thing is that your character changes in some way – and that, preferably, that change is for a better.**

I guess you could have a villainous character arc where somebody gets worse, but in terms of your main characters – your protagonists, your heroes – they

need to go through a change that, as the reader, we support and applaud. We want to see them discovering a new strength or overcoming a weakness.

#2: Pacing

The second thing where quality can be in jeopardy is your pacing. This is something I've occasionally struggled with in books from authors I admire – books that are otherwise good quality – the pacing is just not quite right.

The seventh *Harry Potter* book, for instance, was too slow-paced. There was far too much wandering around in a forest, and not enough was happening and progressing quickly enough, compared with what I'd expected from previous books.

So that's one problem with pacing – that your narrative seems to drag. It's not bad writing; it's not that the scenes aren't interesting and the characters aren't engaging. The reader just wants you to get on with it.

Then there's an opposite problem which is when the pace is too fast, and the author whips through events – and as the reader, you think *woah, slow down a minute, let me catch my breath, let me enjoy this scene.*

Again, these things will often be best addressed in the editing. When you're writing, it's very hard to judge pacing. It could be that because you're writing over a long period of time, you don't notice that the pacing is quite slow – because for you, everything seems slow. It's taking 20 times as long to write as it would take to read.

On the other hand, it could be the case that because you're really in there in the scene – you've imagined it vividly, you're carefully crafting each sentence – it feels like the scene is long enough and that it's said everything it needs to say, and the characters have the space to express themselves and so on. To the reader, though, it might seem like the pacing is much more compact than that, and things move on too quickly.

It's a tricky balance. I do think pacing is a struggle – it's certainly a struggle for me and I think probably for a lot of fiction writers, especially early in their careers.

It's really about making sure the pace is appropriate for your genre and the expectations that your reader will have. Obviously, if you're writing a thriller, the pacing is going to be a little bit different from if you're writing a historical romance.

#3: Worldbuilding / Fact-checking

This isn't one of my strongest points! I could probably do a much better job of having a clear picture of my world in my head. I could probably map things out better. Certainly this has caused me a few headaches in editing – I'm not the kind of person who enjoys doing tons of world-building and research.

I think this is sometime a problem when you're writing fiction that's set in a different culture from yours and you don't necessarily pick up on all the very small differences between cultures. You might have no idea, unless you've lived there for several years, how different things can be even when they might seem on the surface quite similar.

I've noticed this particularly with American authors writing British characters – and I'm sure it happens with British authors writing American characters too. I know when I sent *Lycopolis* to beta-editors, I have an American character there, and they picked up on the fact that some of the words he used weren't sufficiently American and so on.

This is a tricky one. You might get away with it! If you're an American writer, writing about people in Britain, but for a purely American audience, it may well be that a few mistakes go unnoticed. Let's say your character uses the word "pants" for what the British call "trousers" – hey, that seems natural to your audience, they probably won't think twice.

Unfortunately, if someone in Britain reads that, they'll probably know what you mean but it's going to jar because a British person would say "trousers" and use "pants" for what Americans call "underpants." So some words might be just a bit off – the reader will understand what you mean, but it jars them and can knock their impression of quality.

That's one example – I'm sure there are lots of other ways in which the fact-checking and world-building can be a bit off. Maybe it's the way people interact with each other, for instance.

When I've been to America, I've noticed that people are much more friendly – not that Brits aren't friendly, but over here, people don't necessarily strike up a conversation with you in a shop. In some parts of the UK they would, but it varies. In London, people don't tend to make eye-contact on the tube, they don't say "hi" and smile in the street if they don't know you, all those kinds of things.

In America, and it may just be the places I've been there, people seem more open, more friendly. There's a certain confidence in interactions with people – whereas in Britain, we can be a bit awkward and clumsy in our interactions, and avoid eye contact.

It's a massive generalisation. I'm not saying that every American is hugely extroverted and friendly and every Brit is shy and retiring – but the ways in which people might commonly interact in a public space might be quite different from culture to culture.

Even things like how close people will stand to one another, how much personal space you get. We used to live near Peckham in London, and one of the things I always noticed walking through Peckham was that people tended to crowd you on the streets. I think it was just a cultural thing for a lot of the people living there. They weren't so fussed about having lots of personal space, like I might be in a very British way! But it was quite noticeable and a bit odd if you're not used to that.

If you can go and spend some time in the place your novel is set, obviously that's brilliant. If you can't, it's really worth getting some beta-readers who know that world better than you to help you.

If you're coming up with a fantasy world – just inventing the world, doing the world-building – that's a whole different ballgame. Then, it's about the world feeling consistent and not feeling clichéd, and feeling like a world we want to invest in. The problem I sometimes have with fantasy fiction is that it can end up being a bit samey – here's another fantasy place, semi-medieval, castles

and swords, ooh, there's some dragons. Ah, the world is in peril, the hero has to come and save the day ... and so on.

Sometimes, it can feel like I've read this kind of thing before, and I struggle to care about the world. **So you need to get the reader invested in the characters and the world, and gradually give more of it, rather than dumping in loads of information about the world.** Try to make sure it's unique and interesting, but also that readers can relate it to their own experiences of the real world.

It takes time to reach true quality in fiction. It's not something where you're going to be able to be perfect first time, with your first novel, or even your second novel. Maybe with your tenth novel!

You're always going to be on a quest for greater quality, for being able to write fiction that really speaks to readers' hearts, that tells a brilliant story, that has engaging, vivid characters who readers imagine as continuing after the story finishes – and I think you will get there.

Lots of writers, their first few books were maybe not brilliant. If you look back at, say, early Terry Pratchett, it's quite different from the stuff he was later writing. Some people say authors don't reach their stride for several books.

So I'm definitely not saying you have to be perfect from day one – but I think a commitment to quality will serve you better than pretty much anything else, as an author.

You could be wonderful at marketing and promotion, but if your books aren't really genuinely good quality – if they're trite, clichéd characters and situations and a badly paced plot and lazy writing – then you *might* be successful.

Some books are successful, despite being not amazingly well written. But it's going to be a much harder slog. You're going to get negative reviews and so on.

People do succeed with some not-so-great quality fiction. I wouldn't say that *50 Shades of Grey*, for instance, is a masterpiece of great writing, or even of great characterisation and plotting.

The better your books are, though, the more readers you're likely to get, the more opportunities you'll have in terms of approaching agents and publishers and potentially getting a traditional publishing deal and so on.

Quality, as I've said, is something that you don't really need to worry about in your first draft. You might think about things like the world-building, the pacing and the characterisation – the big picture stuff – at this stage, but don't worry about getting every sentence right. Even the bigger picture stuff will probably change as you re-write.

So use the editing phase to hone your work, to refine it, to polish it. I've found that cutting helps: most people tend to over-write (I know I do). If a sentence doesn't really add anything, just get rid of it. This is usually my solution if a line has got mixed reactions from my workshop group – if it can be cut out, cut it out, because it's just less trouble than trying to rewrite it and make it work for everyone.

If you are going to self-publish – and even if you're going to approach agents and go for a traditional publishing deal – it's a great idea to at least think about hiring a freelance editor.

There are a lot of people out there who do that. You pay them a fee, and they will edit your whole manuscript. They basically do what an editor in a publishing house would do, but obviously the publisher is paying for the editing there.

If you can't afford an editor – and I realise that a lot of people are not in a position to do so when they're starting out – then a great alternative is to get together with some writer friends and swap your work in progress.

I've done this with a couple of people: we swapped whole novels when we were at roughly the same stage at the same time. It's a great way to get feedback on the big picture of your work.

That's not always an option – it depends a bit on who you know and how willing they are to help you out – but even if you haven't got people who'll read the whole thing, you might find you've got friends who can at least workshop a few chapters with you.

In particular, don't forget [the Critiques forum in Writers' Huddle](#). I've noticed it's not been used quite so much recently. I don't know whether people were feeling they didn't get much response or critiques. A couple of years ago, we were having more interaction with critiques, and more people posting work there.

So don't be shy about putting something up. It might be that you don't get loads and loads of feedback, but usually you'll get at least a couple of people offering you some comments and some help and support. If you do have a piece of work in progress and you're not sure if it's quite there yet, or you feel like the quality could be improved, do stop by the Critiques forum.

I'd say probably don't post more than a thousand words or so in the forum, perhaps a slightly longer piece if you're linking to it elsewhere, or it gets a bit overwhelming for people to read.

One final resource – if you're in the UK – Writing Magazine has a great column every month called “Under the Spotlight”. They take the first 300 words of a novel and they critique it very, very closely, on a word/sentence level. They look at things like whether a word is the right choice, has the point of view slipped, is this a bit of a cliché, have you repeated yourself, does the reader need this, is this the most powerful word, and so on.

They really drill down to the very fine details. It's an interesting read, to see what's not working, what's picked up on, and so on. It may help you think about your own writing in a slightly more critical way when you're doing that close reading.

Again, if you want to use the Critiques forum for this, feel free: post a very short excerpt and ask people to go through it with a fine-toothed comb to really pick up on every nuance of the words and so on.

I don't think this is something you need to do with your entire novel! But for things like your opening chapters, where readers are deciding whether or not to read on, it's important to get the details right. Once somebody's come with you ten chapters or so, they're probably going to stick with you for the rest – even if there's an occasional bit where the writing isn't quite so smooth and polished as it was at the beginning.

I'm not saying deliberately let the quality slip, but I am saying focus your attention on the beginning – and also on the ending, because that's the impression your readers will be left with when they go away and hopefully write a review or recommend your book to a friend.

I'd love to hear your thoughts about quality in fiction. If you've got any great examples of a piece of fiction you've read, which you thought was either really good – or you started reading something and the quality wasn't quite there – then do feel free to post that in the forums as well. [There's a forum topic here for this seminar](#) where you can ask questions or post your own thoughts, too.

Good luck with your fiction writing! I hope this hasn't seemed too heavy and off-putting, because while it does take time to achieve quality – it takes time and hard work – it's very worth doing. It's a good journey to be on.

Every writer, however brilliant they are – Shakespeare, Jane Austen, whoever you care to name – they all started off having to learn the craft. If you look at Jane Austen's early work when she was a teenager, you can see that she was still learning and she hadn't quite got there. Her spelling wasn't great, at times!

We've all got to go through this process, so please don't feel put off if the quality's not quite where you want it to be yet.

You will get there – and we're here in the Huddle to help, so please do make use of the forums ... and keep writing.