

## CHAPTER ONE

# GET GOING!

Can you really count up all the tips and tricks for becoming a good writer?

I've thought a lot about writing, but I've never tried to count my tricks before — they came out to the strange number of 62 — so this was a new experience for me, as it will be for you.

Out of the 62 tips in this book, I hope you find a few bits of advice that will actually spark your imagination and help to inspire your writing.

My first piece of advice is **never be satisfied with your first draft.**

When I started to write this first chapter, these are the first tips I wrote:

1. Before you begin, sharpen five or six #2 pencils and place them near your keyboard

2. That way, if the writing doesn't go well, you can stab yourself in the eyes with them.

After a while, I decided that might be a tiny bit too negative. So I tossed out the first draft and began again.

Well . . . let's GET GOING.

## **1. STAY AWAY FROM THE FREEZER!**

When I was a kid, we had a meat freezer in the basement of our house — a big white enamel monstrosity shaped like a coffin. Every time I had to go down to get something from it, my mind raced with terrifying possibilities: What if I found a frozen corpse inside? What if I leaned down too far, fell inside, and the lid slammed shut on me? I didn't know it, but I was already dreaming up horror plots.

Sure enough, one day my dad asked me to bring up a roast beef. I went down to the basement, lifted the wide lid of the freezer, and gasped in horror. The frozen blue corpse of a young man lay stretched the length of the freezer, glassy eyes staring up at me.

I let out a shrill cry. The freezer lid fell from my hands and—

Oops. Sorry. Sometimes my imagination runs away with me. You didn't believe me, did you? You didn't really believe I found a corpse in my freezer. Of course you didn't.

I'm just saying I had a lot of fears as a kid.

Later, I learned to channel those fears in my writing. I found that the things that scare us the most can often be the source of our greatest inspiration. So if you're like I was, don't let that hold you back. Use your fears to fuel your writing.

## **2. DO YOU HAVE A COMPULSION? HOW LONG CAN YOU GO WITHOUT WRITING?**

If you want to be a writer, you have to be driven to write. It should be a compulsion.

Even though that's my belief, there are a lot of really successful authors who would totally disagree with me. For example, the great thriller writer Harlan Coben is a friend of mine. Harlan and I never talk about writing when we're together. But one evening, Harlan and I did an event at a Barnes & Noble in New York City where we talked about writing, and in that conversation, we discovered that we have nothing in common at all.

I sit down every day. I love to write and write every morning. Harlan has to force himself to write. He has to scream at himself. He has to call himself all kinds of names to get himself to write. I have an office. I have a room in my apartment where I work. Harlan can't work at home. He has to go out to a coffee shop somewhere. He has to be out

with people. I like quiet. Harlan has to have music going. I outline every book I write, chapter by chapter. Harlan never plans, never does an outline. Never.

So what does that mean?

Every writer is different. I can only tell you what works for me.

### **3. BE A READER.**

To be a writer, you must first be a reader. It's a natural progression, really. I have found that the more I read, particularly in the genres of thrillers and mysteries, the more it helps my own writing. You observe the way people write, how they craft sentences and stories, and you absorb it.

I make a point to read daily, scouring through new works of fiction, mysteries, and thrillers. In college, as an English major, I was exposed to all the greats, and their works have stayed with me over the years. Don't be afraid to draw inspiration from the books you have loved, to borrow and develop them in your own unique way.

### **4. DO YOU LIKE IT OR LOVE IT?**

If you want to be a writer, you have to actually *like* to write. Of course, that is just the first step. You also need to have a good understanding of the craft. You need to learn how to

structure a story, how to create compelling characters, how to use dialogue effectively, and so on. There's a lot to learn, and it can be overwhelming at first.

But if you truly love writing, you'll find that the process of learning how to write is rewarding in itself. You'll know that every word you write is bringing you closer to your goal of becoming a published author.

If you think you want to do it because you want to be famous, or you want your books to become movies, that's probably not a good idea. Things seldom go that way. But many authors get to experience the joy of walking into a bookstore and seeing their title on one of the shelves.

## **5. WHY DO YOU WANT TO WRITE?**

I think that very early on, you have to decide what kind of writer you want to be. I started out writing funny books, and then the scary books came along. My whole goal was to entertain, to get kids to read. I had no further ambition than that.

People always ask, "What are the morals that you're teaching?" There aren't any. In *Goosebumps* or *Fear Street*, there's nothing you can learn except the fun of reading.

Some people think when it comes to kids' books, the kids have to be elevated by what they read. There was always a rule in children's publishing: The characters in a

children's book had to learn and grow. I just rejected that idea. I thought if adults can read something with no socially redeeming value whatsoever — just for fun — then kids have the same right.

Authors also come into school and tell kids they have to write from their heart, and I think that's garbage, too.

I've written over 300 books, and I can honestly say that I haven't written a single one from my heart. That's not to say that I don't put my heart into my writing — because I do. But I write for my readers. I write to entertain and make them laugh. I write to get kids to read. That's my passion. And that's what I want to teach you in this book.

## **6. CHOOSE YOUR GENRE AND AUDIENCE.**

Before you start thinking about your audience and who they are, you want to decide what you want to write.

- § What are you interested in?
- § What do you read?
- § Do you read a lot of science fiction?
- § Do you read a lot of romances?
- § Do you find those really fun?

If so, maybe you want to try to write one.

Then once you figure out what genre you want to write, you can start thinking about the audience. Ask questions to

figure out what you want to do.

- § Do you want to write for adults? Kids?
- § Do you want to write for a big general audience?
- § Do you want to write for a literary audience?

## **7. KNOW YOUR MARKET.**

Once you've figured out your genre, go to the bookstores or search online to see what's already there. It's important to know the market first — to know what people are reading and where your book will go in the store. Don't try to do something that won't fit in somewhere specific. That almost never works.

I think a lot of people would probably criticize that advice and say, "Don't think about the marketing part first. Just write something you like." But if you write something that no one knows how to market, you're going to have a lot of problems.

## **8. FIND THE RIGHT DAY JOB.**

My very first job was writing for movie magazines. My boss had six magazines that she had to fill every month. And there were three of us writers. We'd come in the morning and she'd say, "Do an interview with Diana Ross." I'd say, "Fine, okay," and make up an interview. Then she'd say, "Do an interview with the Beatles."

That was the job. I would write two or three interviews a day, making up everything. It was actually a very creative job and it was very useful for later on because I learned how to write really fast and I learned how to make up everything.

I went from job to job and eventually ended up at Scholastic, writing for social studies magazines. I'd do my work at Scholastic in the morning, and then I'd do my own writing every afternoon. That might be one reason why they fired me. I don't know. But I'd get my work done quickly so that I could get back to my writing.

It's hard, but if you can find a job that gives you time to write and doesn't take all your energy away, that's certainly what I would recommend.

## **9. ALWAYS SAY "YES."**

Always say "yes" to everything. I wouldn't have this career if I didn't have that policy.

One day I was having lunch with my friend Jean Feiwel, who was the editorial director of Scholastic at the time. And Jean had just had a fight with a writer who wrote YA horror. She sat down to lunch and she said, "I'm never working with him again. You could write a good teen horror novel. Go home and write a book called 'Blind Date.'"

I didn't know what she was talking about. What does that mean? Teen horror novel? I said, "Yes, sure," because



I always say yes. Then I went running to the bookstore and I read Christopher Pike, Lois Duncan, Richie Tankersley Cusick, Diane Hoh, and all these other people who were writing teen horror at the time so I could find out what the genre was.

I wrote *Blind Date*, and it was a number one bestseller. I was shocked. I'd never been close to a bestseller list. A year later, I wrote a second teen horror book called *Twisted*. Again, a number one bestseller. I thought, *Forget the funny stuff. I'm going to be scary from now on!*

If I had said, "Well, Jean, I don't really know what you're talking about. You know, I'm a funny guy. I write jokes. I don't write horror," I wouldn't have had this amazing career. None of it would have happened.

It all came from saying, "Yes."