



How to Grow a Novel: The Most Common Mistakes Writers Make and How to Overcome Them

Sol Stein

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Each year thousands of fiction writers, from beginners to bestselling author, benefit from Sol Stein's sold-out workshops, featured appearances at writers' conferences, software for writers, on-line columns, and his popular first book for writers, *Stein on Writing*. Stein practices what he teaches: He is the author of nine novels, including the million-copy bestseller *The Magician*, as well as editor of such major writers as James Baldwin, Jack Higgins, Elia Kazan, Budd Schulberg, W. H. Auden, and Jacques Barzun, and the teacher and editor of several current bestselling authors. What sets Stein apart is his practical approach. He provides specific techniques that speed writers to successful publication.

How to Grow a Novel is not just a book, but an invaluable workshop in print. It includes details and examples from Stein's editorial work with a #1 bestselling novelist as well as talented newcomers. Stein takes the reader backstage in the development of memorable characters and fascinating plots. The chapter on dialogue overflows with solutions for short-story writers, novelists, screenwriters, and playwrights. Stein shows what readers are looking for-- and what they avoid-- in the experience of reading fiction. The book offers guidelines-- and warnings-- of special value for nonfiction writers who want to move into fiction. Stein points to the little, often overlooked things that damage the writer's authority without the writer knowing it. And this book, like no other writing book, takes the reader behind the scenes of the publishing business as it affects writers of every level of experience, revealing the hard truths that are kept behind shut doors.

How to Grow a Novel: The Most Common Mistakes Writers Make and How to Overcome Them Details

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Author : Sol Stein

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From Reader Review How to Grow a Novel: The Most Common Mistakes Writers Make and How to Overcome Them for online ebook

Adam Ross says

A helpful book, though Stein is a hopeless snob ever sneering down his nose at "genre fiction."

Brock Meier says

Based on other readers' reviews, I thought this book could be a useful addition to my toolkit of writing helps, to be tucked away in the dark recesses of my mind as I write my own works.

I tried valiantly to read and absorb Stein's decades of worthy experience in editing (and writing) good literature, but I kept finding myself arguing with him as I read, and discounting his words as formulaic. After three or so chapters, I couldn't take anymore and put the book on a high, back shelf. Perhaps I would give it away at my critique group's annual Christmas party and "white-elephant" book exchange.

But months later, for some reason or other, I picked it up again, determined to get something of value out of it. This time, someone turned on the light switch and I found myself eagerly devouring Stein's words of wisdom. I'm not sure what caused the change, but I have found this book to be very useful, not so much in strictly following his cautions, but it has helped me hold my own work more loosely—to press forward into looking for what's best, not merely settling for the good.

Delvin Chatterson says

Great guide for writing a first, or better, novel.

Laura says

I enjoyed this book, and hoping to get more out of his earlier book, *Stein On Writing: A Master Editor of Some of the Most Successful Writers of Our Century Shares His Craft Techniques and Strategies*. He is a bit full of himself, but there's good information here. Probably worth buying.

Ariella Carver says

I picked this up because I found his previous book, *Stein On Writing*, very helpful and enjoyable to read. Unfortunately, I found that most of the worthwhile material in this book was covered far better with wonderful concrete examples in *On Writing*. Quite frankly, if he didn't reference his previous work so often in *How to Grow a Novel*, I would have assumed that this came first and that *On Writing* was the follow up. I still found *How to Grow a Novel* to be interesting, particularly his experiences as a publisher, but it's far

from the resource Stein on Writing is.

Justin K. Rivers says

Well-written, sometimes rambling off into name-dropping tangents. It contains some useful insight but is perhaps unfocused. Part of it is how to write, part of it is general analysis of writing and publishing from the viewpoint of someone who has worked as a writer, editor, and publisher.

If you are looking for a manual or guide on how to write well, this is not it. But if you've already gotten prose under your belt, and want some insight into how an editor or publisher views a novel, this might help you. Just ignore all the out-of-date stuff.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

There's some extremely valuable info here that I've not found in other books on the craft, including some useful insider info on the publishing biz. Unfortunately, you have to wade through a lot of examples and self-promotional, self-congratulatory b.s. to find the good stuff. It wouldn't be ungenerous to say the book could have been half the length. Already outdated in some ways, but still highly useful for serious people.

Stan James says

I'm a sucker for "how to write a novel" books and when How to Grow a Novel was on sale, I picked it up as I was interested in Stein's perspective not just as a writer but also as an editor and publisher.

There's some good stuff here and the advice is practical and precise, if sometimes contradictory. Stein both advises writers to read their own work aloud--and to not do so (because novels are read, not heard). He offers some genuinely interesting glimpses into how the book publishing business works (or at least worked, as the book was originally published in 1999, predating the rise of self-publishing through e-books).

I enjoyed the use of specific excerpts to underline the points being made but was less enthused with the self-promotion. The book Stein recommends the most is his own. At times he makes Stein On Writing sound better than this book, perhaps hoping to net a few more sales.

By the end, I found How to Grow a Novel more interesting as a reflection on the book publishing industry and less on the actual writing of a novel. A beginning writer could do worse (the stories of six-figure advances may be depressing in a way Stein didn't anticipate) but could also do better, especially if looking for help that more readily mixes nuts and bolts advice with inspiration.

Louise Silk says

I came upon this book when I was trying to find the answer to a technical question about the novel I am writing. I feel like this book gave me a complete writing workshop just when I could use it the most.

Some of the most important points:

Conflict is a necessary element for dramatic action.

You have to capture the reader from the beginning or they will never love the book.

Generalities are blurry; success lies in details that enable the reader to experience the scenes.

One plus one equals one half. Conveying the same matter more than one in different words diminishes the effect of what is said.

Story is the concept; plot is ideas put into scenes that can be changed, shifted about, added to or deleted from.

Dialogue should be terse, tense, adversarial, illogical and oblique. What counts is not what is said but what is meant.

Point of view is an opportunity to get intimate with the reader.

To find your own voice- cut out cliches, keep things visual, get rid of formality and posturing. Voice is saying what you think without the restraint of what someone else will think about it.

The less work the reader has to do, the more she will appreciate what the writer has done.

Typeface matters. He recommends Courier because it is easy on the eye and moves them through the page.

Quinn Irwin says

Stein writes a few gems of advice here and there, but he also lays just as many eggs; some of his advice is arbitrary, sometimes he rambles on points which could have taken half as long to make (the editor needs an editor), and his suggestions for further reading include his own book--*On Writing*--which he references throughout the entire text, all the while making it sound better than *How to Grow a Novel*, and he suggests other books written by friends, a strategy that basically undermines the author's authority and any trust that the reader may have felt toward the writer comes into question(something he warns us about in his book). The most interesting and helpful advice comes near the end when he gives us a glimpse of the publishing world, the contents of which still have been voiced better in other books. Afterward he expresses worry about new technology, suggesting that technology makes us less intelligent while also busier, a good point--but then he has no problem shamelessly and immediately promoting his own software, which supposedly makes writing much easier and, I'm tempted to guess, much more formulaic and less intelligent. Perhaps this book is wonderful for the neophyte writer who has only a passing interest in writing and who wants to be told exactly what to do; perhaps, if you are this writer, this book will help your novel grow. But if you already know a bit about craft, you should probably look elsewhere. His advice may seem constricting to you.

carlageek says

Disappointing - doesn't say much that isn't covered in more depth in the excellent *Stein on Writing: A Master Editor of Some of the Most Successful Writers of Our Century Shares His Craft Techniques and Strategies*, to which this book refers constantly. In *Stein on Writing*, Stein's occasional self-absorption and arrogance is easy to ignore because the advice is so clear and actionable as to be downright inspiring. In this book, the advice is thin and the arrogance takes center stage. And even if it doesn't annoy you -- there's really no point in reading both this book and *Stein on Writing*, and if you're only going to read one, *Stein on Writing* is better by a country mile.

Kevin Albrecht says

(Recommended in "Self-Editing for Fiction Writers" for being an anecdotal guide on the common pitfalls of writing a novel.)

Marrije says

One of those books that start out really strong & helpful, and then sort of ... fizzles towards the end, as the author pads out his material to Proper Book Length.

Thomas says

So far as I can tell books on writing fiction break down into three genres: 1) Books by writers passing on what they've learned along the way (King) 2) Books by writers/teachers geared toward students (Burroway), and 3) Books by editors/agents that give an inside peek at the publishing industry.

Stein's *How to Grow a Novel* is a hybrid of all three. Before he became an editor he wrote a bestseller called *The Magician* and few other novels. In form and function this book reminds me very much of Donald Maas's *Writing the Breakout Novel*. There's plenty of banter about six figure advances and million-copy sellers, the kind I find horrid and depressing and ultimately self-defeating for any beginning author. I don't entirely buy the idea that just because a book sells a gazillion copies it automatically has value or even that it has lasting power.

So what's valuable here? I like Stein's practicality. I like how he puts a writer's emphasis exactly where it should be, on the reader. Stein reminds us that readers pick up our books hoping for an experience. They want to be transported and if we're going to do this there's a few things we should keep in mind. The essence of such stories has to do with characters who readers who form an immediate emotional bond with. It has to do with manipulation and "never taking the reader where they want to go." The whole first chapter on breaking down scene creation for the purpose of considering emotional resonance and forward momentum was great. "In fiction the supreme function is not to convey emotions but to create them in the reader" he says at one point reminding us of the importance of details and the objects in our characters' lives.

I even picked up some ideas for teaching. "If you're finding it difficult to give a character color, pick up a children's book, preferably at a library or a bookstore where lots of children's books are at hand. If there's one that affected your emotions as a child steep yourself in it again. If not just browse. You'll meet characters more extravagant than those you usually find in adult fiction." Stein advises replacing dull characters with those that are "fresh and wild." I'd love to try this in one of my fiction classes, by bringing in a collection of children's books, classic and contemporary, and breaking up my students in small groups and have them take turns reading from them aloud. Then they could journal about the "characters" they met and later imagine the first page of a story of such a character in the adult world. It's worth a shot. At the very least it might just remind my students of the childlike wonder everyone of us hopes to discover when we pick up a book, or when we start writing a story.

We authors need such reminders, too. It can be lonely business, especially since novels are such a long haul. Every once in a while it's nice to have a book like this come along to refresh us for the road ahead.

Marissa says

I got the feeling that Sol Stein had a lot of great writing advice . . . but also that he'd explained most of it in *Stein On Writing: A Master Editor of Some of the Most Successful Writers of Our Century Shares His Craft Techniques and Strategies*, and that he wasn't willing to repeat it. (In fact, in this book he gives several references like, "Just read chapter umpty-ump of *Stein on Writing*."

Having not read *Stein on Writing*, I was adrift through parts of this book. And not being interested in the incredibly self-aggrandizing name dropping that Stein lovingly engages in time after time after time, I was rolling my eyes through other parts of this book.

Then there were the chapters that gave honest-to-god great writing advice, and that's why I gave this book three stars. Because there is some gold among the dross, but you wish it were a lot more concentrated.
