

# Writers on Writing

Some of our favorite authors share their best advice for your middle school writers. BY TARA WELTY

## AVI

**AUTHOR OF:** *Midnight Magic*, *Crispin: At the Edge of the World*, *City of Orphans*, and many more

**BEST ADVICE:** A writer once said, “When writing, show, do not tell.” That’s especially true when you create characters. What you, the writer, say about character is not good writing until you, the writer, show what a character does.

You could say, “Polly was a brave girl.” That doesn’t mean much. Instead, think how Polly must cross a rough river. Does she swim across? Does she give up the idea of crossing as too dangerous? Does she build a bridge? Does she search for a safer place to cross? Does she get someone to carry her across ... so on and so on. In other words, what Polly does tells the readers what she is as a character.

As the story goes on, Polly will make many decisions as to what she does. Add up all the things she does and you have her character. Yes, her character and personality can change, but there must be logical progression that your reader can follow.

**TRY THIS:** Write a paragraph in which you show us a character only by things they do. Don’t write, “She was brave.” Describe her brave actions.

## BLUE BALLIETT

**AUTHOR OF:** *Chasing Vermeer*, *The Calder Game*, *Hold Fast*, and more

**BEST ADVICE:** Secrets I wish I’d been told before I became a writer: Read lots of books! All writers stand on the shoulders of other writers. I always try to figure out how a writer holds my attention. And look at each book as a

puzzle with pieces that can be pulled apart and put back together.

Ernest Hemingway said that writing is rewriting. I look at rewriting as the chance to smooth out the rough places and say exactly what I mean. I used to be impatient with that. Now I would freak out if someone took the first draft of one of my books and said, “Okay! You’re done!”

If you’re stuck, read it aloud. Sometimes you can hear something that you can’t see. And never bore yourself. If you’re bored with something you’ve written, the reader will be, too.

Keep writing. Carry a notebook. “Words are free and plentiful,” as one of the characters in *Hold Fast* says. I took many notes and spent years looking and listening before I started to write that book. I turned myself into a word sponge, and I realized that writing down words can actually make dreams happen. It happens for my characters in *Hold Fast*, it happened for me, and it can happen for you.

## WALTER DEAN MYERS

**AUTHOR OF:** *Fallen Angels*, *Monster*, *Darius & Twig*, and many more

**BEST ADVICE:** I’ve published more than 100 books, and it still amazes me that I’ve been lucky enough to spend a lifetime doing what I truly love: writing. I try to write the books I wanted to read as a teen.

You must also live the best life you can and be true to yourself; good writing will follow. My best secret? Yes, writing is about well-placed words and strong feelings, but it’s also about

thinking and working! I do the thinking as I prewrite character studies, scenes, etc. The subsequent work is what makes a good book.

## JENNIFER A. NIELSEN

**AUTHOR OF:** *The Ascendance Trilogy*  
**BEST ADVICE:** My mom’s parenting philosophy was “It can always get worse.” So if I complained, my bedtime could be earlier, grounding could last longer, and so on.

This same idea is true for writers, especially with series books. If things are tough for your hero in Book 1, how can you make it worse for each book afterward?

**TRY THIS:** Start with your hero in some sort of trouble. Then ask, “How can it get worse?” Every complication adds suspense and makes your hero stronger. There’s just one catch—as the writer, you have to get them out of it!

## LAUREN TARSHIS

**AUTHOR OF:** *I Survived* series, *Emma-Jean Lazarus* series

**BEST ADVICE:** What I love about writing historical fiction is that I get to go back in time each time I work on a book, and I always begin with a set of very specific questions to guide my journey. What I want to know first is what life would have been for me—what I would be wearing, eating, thinking, worrying about. Try this when you are researching—write down a list of specific questions, and let these questions guide you. Your process will feel less like work and more like an exciting adventure.