

## **The Big Mistake** by Linda Rohrbough

You can make a number of mistakes in fiction. I see them in the works of best-selling authors all the time. But the most common misstep writers make, and the one that keeps most from being published, is what I call the Big Mistake. And it's the one that knocks even the most talented writers out of the box for publication.

The Big Mistake is to not have a highly motivated character overcoming obstacles to achieve a goal. This is essentially a storytelling (plotting) problem. And it's a doozy.

What's interesting to me is how simple this sounds. I was one of those people who nodded my head agreeably, yah, yah, yah, about what I thought was a restatement of the obvious. Only I didn't get it either. The feedback I received on my first novel was that *after* my reader trudged through fifty pages, they couldn't put it down. But that first fifty was a death march.

I tried everything I could think of to fix the beginning: critique groups, contests with feedback, asking best-selling friends, and my own rewrites. An experienced writer advised me to cut the first fifty pages, then sprinkle information from the cut portion into the rest of the book. But it wasn't a plot where I could do that. I thought about shelving the book and writing another, but my readers said the book was too important and needed to be out there. Finally, I got into a workshop where a scriptwriter who became my writing buddy said, "Linda, it's all here. Just rearrange it like this..." And from there, I landed a fiction agent.

But I was still lost because I didn't know *why* the last rewrite worked. How could I reproduce this success if I didn't know how I got it to begin with? I realized then why so many authors have a pile of books under the bed. Instead of rewriting a book until it works, they write another. And another. At some point, they hit on what works by accident, then go with their instincts.

Which is probably why so many of my critiquers, including my *New York Times* best-selling friends, couldn't help me. It's like a painter who knows when it feels right, but can't teach anyone else how to paint. Only I'm not the kind of gal who can do hit-or-miss. Those of you who've been in my workshops know I like to work by principles I can apply in any situation.

In those first fifty pages, my character did want something, but I never came out and said what it was. And she wasn't very motivated. I knew enough to throw conflict and obstacles at her, but she was bumping along fine in the beginning. As I think back, I believe I was trying to be subtle, something my university creative writing training instilled in me. (By the way, I have a whopping forty hours of creative writing education,

most of it at a graduate level, with a 4.0 grade point average, and I never learned any of this in those classes.)

Before the rewrite, what my character wanted stayed the same, and stayed hidden, until page fifty. Then I finally let the reader see her say, “I’m done crying, I’m going to do something about this crummy situation I’m in.” By the way, that’s also where the book became much easier to write. Before that, it was torture. The point is, I rewrote the book so that my protagonist was never without clear motivation, clearly shown to the reader.

Now this sounds simple, yes? And obvious. But notice I never said it was EASY. Because it isn’t.

This big mistake is no secret. Debra Dixon’s *GMC: Goal, Motivation & Conflict* was one of the books I bought at the bookstore during my first Pikes Peak Writers conference. Jim Frey, author of *How to Write a Damn Good Novel* and one of the keynote speakers at the 2009 conference, talked about writing well-motivated characters overcoming obstacles to achieve a goal. The late Dwight Swain, author of *Techniques of the Selling Writer* asked this question in the 1960’s, “What does your character want and what is in the way of them getting it?”

Before that, in the 1940’s, there was Lajos Egri’s classic, *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, a book Jim Frey said his mentor made him review a whopping forty times before he got this concept. Jim said he even made a tape recording of himself reading Egri’s book and played it over and over as he drove around doing his day job as an insurance adjuster. Best-selling Western author and two-time Spur award-winner Dusty Richards once told me you cannot remind your reader too many times of your character’s goal. I own and have read all the books I’ve mentioned, but I didn’t absorb what they were teaching. I listened to Dusty, but I didn’t *hear* him.

Then I spent eight days last summer in a brutal, intensive, invitation-only workshop with Jim Frey in the California mountains. It was there that I really saw this principle for writing fiction for the first time. I got it on the first day, watching Jim coach other authors. (We spent eight twelve-hour days in a sprawling house isolated on the side of a steep hill, working non-stop the whole time.) I remember Jim fervently complaining that he was tired of “teaching rocks to fly.”

Now I am constantly surprised by unpublished but extremely, and I mean mega-talented, writers who make the Big Mistake. They seem to understand the craft. There’s a strong sense of place. They have a distinctive voice. I start to get a feel for the characters right away. I can follow what’s happening. There are interesting events. Most of these writers can write those one-liners I go back to re-read because of the way they turn a phrase. They’ve obviously been practicing their craft for a while, but the story isn’t going anywhere. Of course, you can tell too much too soon. Brain dumps are to be avoided. But I see very little of that in writers who come to me for coaching.

I tried to explain this to a writer I was coaching on her manuscript. She objected, saying she wanted her wealthy teenage character to be a slacker. I knew then I'd missed the mark. I said sure, have him be a slacker, but have him be a highly motivated slacker, and let the reader see that. How would someone behave who was committed to slacking? What lengths would they go to? Take us there. No reader wants spend the opening pages watching an unmotivated teenage boy eat pizza and talk with a friend about how much he dislikes dad. But take that same kid and let us see he's going to do as little as possible in order to annoy dad—now that's interesting.

Perhaps the boy could manipulate a poorer friend into spending the last of his cash for pizza, just because he knows it would annoy his father, who isn't even there. You don't have to reveal he's angry with Dad. It's enough to know his goal for the scene.

Goals can start small and change over the course of the novel. Do keep in mind that readers like things to connect, so it's preferable that the opening scene goal relate in some way to the overall story goal.

During a meal at the last conference, I was telling my story about how I got a grasp on this principle to a group of PPW writers. To illustrate, I reached over and picked up a random book off the table. It happened to be a mystery novel getting "buzz" because it was nominated for a major award. I opened to the first page and started reading. I didn't have to finish the first page to prove my point. In the first THREE sentences I knew what the character wanted badly and what the obstacles were. I saw the light bulb go on for the writers at my table. Of course, when I turned to pick up the book at the end of the meal, it had already been snatched up. (Drat.) I've forgotten the title and the author, but those first three sentences stayed with me.

I hope this rushed treatment of the Big Mistake helps you have your lightbulb moment. From experience, I know it is not easy to grasp the concept of always having the character's goal in front of the reader (especially in the beginning). But once you get that down, your writing will take a quantum leap forward.

#### Sidebar:

Books to Help You Avoid the Big Mistake:

*GMC: Goal, Motivation & Conflict* by Debra Dixon

*How to Write a Damn Good Novel* by Jim Frey

*Techniques of the Selling Writer* by Dwight Swain

*The Art of Dramatic Writing* by Lajos Egri.

*Linda Rohrbough has been writing professionally since 1989, and has more than 5,000 articles, seven books, and numerous awards for her fiction and non-fiction. Linda's latest book is Weight Loss Surgery with the Adjustable Gastric Band (Da Capo Lifelong Books, March 2008). Visit her website: [www.LindaRohrbough.com](http://www.LindaRohrbough.com)*

*Originally appeared in The Pikes Peak Writer, Volume IX, Issue 5, September 2010.*