

The Busy Author's Guide to Writing Blurbs: A Step by Step Manual

I've been in the publishing business for a few years now, and I've come to one, undeniable, unarguable conclusion: writers are insane. Loco. Crazy. What else explains our need to take a question like "What if a woman fell in love with her neighbour?" turn it into a story worth a few thousand words, then break the whole thing down to a two-hundred word blurb? Insanity, I tell you...insanity with a colourful blend of masochism, despair, and crazy optimism (with a nice merlot to compliment the complex mixture and bring out the delicate yet fragrant tone of persistence).

Blurbs. It's no coincidence the word sounds a lot like "blerg" and reminds me of the same sound you make when throwing up. Six letters: b-l-u-r-b-s that can send the most stoic writer racing for the safe comfort of a dark, quiet corner. Goodness knows, just the thought of having to write one makes me want to crawl under the desk and stuff chocolate like an unhinged chipmunk.

Blurbs are intimidating. Just how does one take an eight-thousand or eighty-thousand-word story and condense it into a two-hundred word paragraph that will entice readers? I mean, without including the sentence "read this book and I'll pay you one hundred dollars!"

After months of research (by which I mean drank a lot, read a lot, and found a myriad of ways I could convince my husband that chocolate was a food group, and worthy of being a breakfast meal), I realized really good blurbs have a formula...of sorts. Sorry, guys, no easy answers, but thankfully, there are some cheat sheets.

To make this as easy as possible, we'll break it into three parts.

PART ONE: WHAT IS THE MAIN PLOT OF YOUR STORY?

In writing a blurb, an author need to answer six questions: What does the main character want/what is the status quo? How does it change? How does it get worse? How does the character try to fix it? How does the character's actions in question #4 make things worse? What is at stake for the character?

So, let's take the questions, one at a time, and use one of my stories *Feuding Hearts*, as the example. Got your pen and paper? Good. Let's do this together. I've put notes under the questions to help you figure out the answer you need.

1) What does the main character want/what is the status quo?

(note to author: you need to set up the jumping point for the story, to ground the reader in "life as-is" so they have a sense of "what life may be.")

Angel Baxter wants some peace and quiet from the constant bickering of her nana and their next-door neighbour.

2) How does it change?

(note to author: change for the better—remember, story is about conflict. This is the perceived high point, from which the poor character's life will turn into a roller-coaster and readers will happily strap in for the ride.)

The neighbor's super-hot grandson, Harry Garret, shows up. Now, Angel has a potential ally, and if she's lucky, a date for Saturday night.

3) How does it get worse?

(note to author: this is where it starts going bad. Enter the conflict.)

Neither Nana or Harry's grandfather are willing to budge or say sorry.

4) How does the character try to fix it?

(note to author: your character wants to get back to the way life was at question one or two. They want to fix the problem.)

She and Harry make plans to go out together and come up with a way to bring the feuding seniors together.

5) How does the character's decision in question #4 make things worse?

(note to author: ramp up the conflict. Think about the crisis that befalls the character just before the story climax. What happens?)

Before Angel and Harry can broker a date, let alone a peace treaty, Angel's nana decides to sprinkle environmentally unfriendly fertilizer all over the neighbour's lawn. This, of course, completely irritates Harry and doesn't bode well for Angel ever getting a date.

6) What is at stake for the character?

(note to author: here's the crux of the story, and here's your chance to tell readers why they should care. What is the big loss, the heartbreak waiting?)

At the start of the story, the only thing at stake was Angel's peace of mind. Now, she's about to lose a super cute guy AND her sanity.

Thanks to the questions, we now have the following framework for our story blurb: Angel Baxter wants some peace and quiet from the constant bickering of her nana and their next-door neighbour. The neighbour's super-hot grandson, Harry Garret, shows up. Now, Angel has a potential ally, and if she's lucky, a date for Saturday night. [But] Neither Nana or Harry's grandfather is willing to budge or say sorry. She [Angel] and Harry make plans to go out together and come up with a way to bring the feuding seniors together. Before Angel and Harry can broker a date, let alone a peace treaty, Angel's nana decides to sprinkle environmentally unfriendly fertilizer all over the neighbour's lawn. This, of course, completely irritates Harry and doesn't bode well for Angel ever getting a date. At the start of the story, the only thing at stake was Angel's

peace of mind. Now, she's about to lose a super cute guy AND her sanity.

PART TWO: SETTING THE TONE OF THE BLURB

The above blurb is a good framework (if I do say so myself, and heck, it's my article, so I'm going to say so). I'm under two hundred words and I have the main core conflicts of the story. As nice as that all is, there are a few things I need to look at: first off, we need some bridge sentences to connect the ideas. Secondly, the writing has to be tightened. Third, well, it's a nice start, but this blurb is so boring, it could be used non-medical alternative for insomnia pills.

If you've been working on your blurb, then you may see the same issues in your work. How does a writer fix all this? In a word: details.

The way you use words to tweak your blurb is what will give readers an idea of the kind of story they're getting themselves into. So, let's go back to *Feuding Hearts* and kick around some ideas.

There are a few things I want readers to know when they read the blurb. Things like: Angel is Southern. I want the blurb to have that great Southern drawl, for readers to think of mint juleps and hot, humid nights. However, I DO NOT want to overdo it. Southern drawl is brilliant, readers hearing duelling banjos, is not.

Secondly, readers need to know that Nana is wonderfully eccentric, the kind of don't-sass-me-take-charge-say-what-she-wants senior citizen that I want to be when I grow up. Readers also need to know that Harry is a gardener.

Most importantly, I want people to know the story is a romantic comedy. This is the kind of story that will make readers smile and laugh, a light-hearted break from the day. So, I don't want to use strong-association words or terms (like "Her life depends on..."), and I don't want to be heavy-handed.

With a few tweaks, this is what I end up with:

The move from Georgia to Miami was supposed to bring peace and calm, but for the past three months, Angel Baxter's been playing reluctant mediator to her nana and their eighty-five year-old neighbour. Between ripped up azalea bushes, wrecked bird baths, and her grandmother prancing across the lawn like a deranged pixie, Angel's nerves are frayed and she's got more problems than a three-legged cat in a dog pound. But help shows up in the sexiest form: Harry Garret, the neighbor's gorgeous grandson. The drool-worthy gardener offers his hand in the negotiations, and the rest of his body on a date at a French restaurant. But when her nana's pranks go too far, will Angel lose out on more than peace and quiet, but on a chance at love, as well?

So, just like you when you're writing your blurb, this is my stop and check time. What do I love about this blurb: I've cut down the word count (from 159 to 132), and I've managed to get in the details I wanted (Angel being Southern, etc.). I love the

“deranged pixie” line because that really describes the grandmother, and I adore the “three-legged cat” because it aptly describes how Angel feels. The last line is good for letting readers know that more than a lawn’s at stake if things don’t get resolved. I think I’ve done a satisfactory job of letting readers know it’s a light story and a comedy (after all, deranged pixies in horrors/dark stories don’t usually prance).

What I’m not sure of: the “rest of his body.” I’m not sure if it reads the way I want. This is where my crit partners (and yours, when you’re reviewing your blurb) will come in handy. Get people who love your genre to read your blurb. Get people who DON’T love your genre to read your blurb. It’ll be a great way for you to figure out what is working and what isn’t in your paragraph.

If you’re your blurb comes back with red marks all over the place, it’s okay. Go back to your questions. Did you hit the main conflicts and plot points? Did you match tone/voice of the blurb with the story?

PART THREE: TROUBLE-SHOOTING

If you’re having troubles writing a blurb that really nails your story idea, try writing the non-blurb. If your story is a dark, serious one, try a paragraph that describes it as a farce. Perhaps by writing what your story *isn’t*, you can figure out what your story *is*.

If we take the above blurb and twist the details (changes are in caps), we get:

The move from NEW YORK to Miami was supposed to bring peace and calm, but for the past three months, Angel Baxter’s been ON THE RECEIVING END OF CRUEL PRANKS. Between ripped up azalea bushes, wrecked bird baths, and POISONED OAK TREES, Angel’s nerves are SHOT AND SHE’S THINKING OF MOVING, JUST TO GET AWAY FROM THE UNKNOWN PRANKSTER. But help shows up in the MOST UN-EXPECTED WAY: Harry Garret, the NEW NEIGHBOR NEXT-DOOR. The DETECTIVE offers his HELP IN FINDING THE CULPRIT. SOON, AFTERNOON MEETINGS TURN INTO ROMANTIC EVENINGS. But when ANGEL’S KIDNAPPED BY THE STALKER, will SHE lose out on MORE THAN A CHANCE AT LOVE, BUT ON HER LIFE, AS WELL?

Hopefully, you can see by changing the wording, the job occupation, and excluding certain characters, the tone of the story shifts dramatically. This no longer reads like a light-hearted, funny story, but something far darker. Remember, the questions will get you the framework, the details will give you the voice.

Back to *Feuding Hearts*. As you can see, there’s still work to do. I want to think about that fourth sentence. If my crit partners and editor give the okay, then I’ll leave it. If not, it’ll have to go through the grinder, once more. But that’s what makes us writers so determined (and insane). Going back and editing...and editing...did I mention the editing?

My fellow crazies, may your blurbs write themselves, and may you never lack for chocolate. And if you can only have one, then may you have closets of chocolate (heck, the blurbs have never written themselves before, why should they start now)?

Reprinted with permission. Natasha Deen is a super-hero in training—hey, one day being a klutz will be a superpower...if she doesn't break anything vital in the meantime. When not tripping over her feet, she writes for The Wild Rose Press and plays butler and cuddler to her furry boys. Check out her website www.natashadeen.com and drop her a line, she could use the excuse to stop petting the dogs and cats.

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