

# HOW TO WRITE CRIME



Bestselling crime authors share their top tips for writing crime, courtesy of CrimeFest.



Beware of the double-edged sword of social media. It's very easy to sit on Twitter et al and 'be a writer' rather than closing it all down and getting on with the job of actually writing. It's great to be able to connect with other writers, but it's also not healthy to surround yourself with them all the time. You don't need all their advice, or to hear all their good news of bestsellers and awards (no one publicises their worst days after all), you just need to do your own thing and trust in the stories you want to tell. Invest in a programme like Freedom that turns it all off and won't let you turn it back on till the time is done and get lost in your own book. Freedom has saved my sanity and career many times over.

**Sarah Pinborough**, *Behind Her Eyes* and *Dead to Her*.

Don't talk about writing – just write. Don't tell people your stories. Not because they'll steal them but because you dissipate them. There's fantastic power in a first draft. It gets lost if you talk about it too much. Get it on the page. Always finish a day's work by leaving a final full stop untyped; you'll know what's got to be done when you sit down the next day. Welcome feedback. Listen to what readers tell you. You can choose to ignore it if you want. Don't let your ego get in the way of your development as a writer. Don't be scared of mistakes. As Miles Davis said: There are no mistakes, baby.

**JJ Connolly**, *Layer Cake* (Duckworth)



You should always worry more about the characters and the world they inhabit than the plot. A fabulous twist is worthless if we don't care about the character who's subject to that twist. A series of grisly murders won't mean anything if we don't feel – temporarily – a part of the world in which those murders take place. The plot must fit together, just as the chassis of a car must be sound, but when did you last buy a car because of its chassis?

**Kevin Wignall**, *The Names of the Dead* (Thomas & Mercer)



Search for first-person accounts of the experiences you're intending to write about. Read non-fiction and detailed news reports. Speak to survivors, and to those who work in the support services. All other research can be retrofitted but if the story doesn't have a beating heart, it won't reach readers. Empathy is so much more important than statistics or science. Aim to tell your story's big emotional truths as honestly as you can. Ask yourself, why do I care so much about telling this story? Why should readers care?

**Sarah Hilary**, *Never Be Broken* (Headline)



Be fearless. Don't look at the blank page and be afraid of the hard work to come, instead see it as an opportunity to absolutely smash it. Don't settle for anything less than the very best you can do. These are your words, and they should make you feel something when you write them. Whether it's pride or despair or something in between, that's okay. If you care, your readers will too.

**Chris Whitaker**, *We Begin At The End* (Zaffre)



Write the jacket copy for your finished book before you start. This will distil the essence of your idea and often provides the story's jumping-in point. Even if you don't plot, keep a summary as you write. At the end of each scene, jot down a précis of action, dialogue, and any clues that need to be returned to later. I also note Day 1, etc, weather, injuries, and a rough idea of time and day. All invaluable for editing later. Write every character as if you mean it. No two-dimensional players there simply to spout plot. Visualise them all.

**Zoë Sharp**, author of the *Charlie Fox* series.



My advice is about writing for both books and screen. I always go to source and do lengthy research before I even begin. My most high-profile projects have been based around criminality and I found very early on in my career that the best research I could do was to speak directly with prisoners, police officers and forensic scientists. It is imperative to gain their confidence, and to also gain their respect. I also advise any writer who has succeeded in gaining a commission to have all their contracts checked and explained by a good media lawyer.

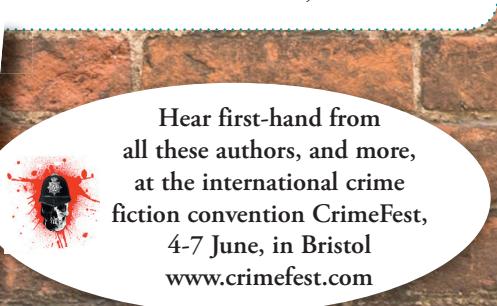
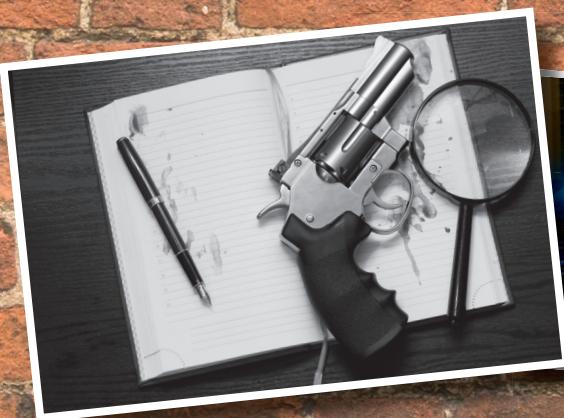
**Lynda La Plante, *Buried* (Zaffre).**



The best crime novels – like most of the best novels of whatever genre – begin with a good idea on which the plot hinges. It's hard to offer advice on how to get ideas. They're fickle as well as stubborn, so they can't be wished out of the ether, but, on the other hand, once they're in your

head, they tend to insist on being written. So, let's assume you have the idea and it's clearly suitable for development as a crime novel. The next step, I'd recommend, is to forget that what you're writing is a crime novel. Just let the story grow naturally. There's no need to seek out obviously crime-related material or characters. Real people and real problems are the making of every story. The crime genre is broad and generous, so don't let it become any kind of limitation. You can do anything – go anywhere, in time and space – in a novel. That's the wonder of writing fiction. And, as we know, there's crime everywhere – and there always has been.

**Robert Goddard, *One False Move*.**



Hear first-hand from all these authors, and more, at the international crime fiction convention CrimeFest, 4-7 June, in Bristol [www.crimefest.com](http://www.crimefest.com)



## Under the covers

Debut author **Gillian Harvey** admits her book-launch expectations all come from *Bridget Jones*

Excuse me, but what's a book launch?

Before signing my deal, I was confident that I knew pretty much all there was to know about the publishing industry. I'd watched *Sex in the City*. I'd seen *Bridget Jones*. I was familiar with the relationship between author and agent, agent and publisher. I knew the different steps I'd have to take before I could clasp my published novel in my sweaty little hands.

Or so I thought.

I recently asked my publisher if there'd be a book launch for *Everything is Fine*. But what I should really have asked is 'What actually is a book launch?'

I have a vague idea, but until recently I hadn't realised just how vague.

I've never been to a book launch in real life – the closest thing to it was watching the release of *Kafka's Motorbike* in *Bridget Jones's Diary*. That involved a few tables of canapés, a collection of random professional-looking types – plus Renée Zellweger, Colin Firth (aka Mark Darcy) and Hugh Grant (the dashing Daniel Cleaver).

Even though I know it's utterly ridiculous, whenever anyone mentions the words 'book launch' it's all I can picture. And I have a nagging feeling that watching this short, fictional snippet has in no way prepared me for reality.

I'm almost definitely sure that there will be no A-list film stars at my launch. I won't (thank goodness) be introduced by *the man we all like to call Mr Fitzherbert (tits-pervert)*. Nobody (other than my mum) is going to be describing my book as *one of the top ten books of our time at least!*

As things are, I'm more likely to be found circling the drain than moving in literary circles. Nobody's really heard of me (although, obviously stand by for world-wide fame and fortune). I'm pretty sure they're not going to put up barriers or close Oxford Street for the event.

So what will happen? Do I have to say something? Should I invite my mum? Should I make the most of the occasion and buy myself a new sparkly outfit? Will there be wine, or should I bring an emergency hipflask? And, please god, nobody's going to expect me to read some of my work out, right?

The only thing I can be reasonably confident about is – if it all goes completely tits-up, I won't be whisked away for a slap-up meal by Hugh Grant.