

**The First Two Pages of “Manual for Success” by Sandra Benson**  
From *Hook, Line, and Sinker: The Seventh Guppy Anthology*  
Edited by Emily P.W. Murphy (Wolf's Echo Press)

An Essay by Sandra Benson

Short stories don't give writers much time to get things done. “Manual for Success,” which I wrote for the Guppy Chapter of Sisters in Crime anthology *Hook, Line, and Sinker*, clocks in at fewer than 4800 words. Just as with a full-length novel, though, I needed to catch the reader's attention right away.

Within the first few paragraphs, I had to communicate the setting, the main character, and What's Going On, or WGO. If you can't get those concepts across early, there's a good chance you're meandering.

Are there readers today who have patience for meandering? I doubt it. Now, the opening of *Les Misérables* (the book, my friend, not the movie) meanders majestically. Jean Valjean doesn't even show up until page 120. But I am not Victor Hugo, and *that* story is anything but short.

Where was I? Ah yes, getting to the point quickly.

You see what a challenge that can be?

So, there was the general goal to start my story with a strong anchor, so it didn't drift away. On top of that, “Manual for Success” is a humorous crime story. In some circles, this is . . . unexpected. But to each their own.

The opening paragraphs gave me a fleeting opportunity to establish the setting, main character, What's Going On, *and* the expectation of some levity, all with the goal of engaging the reader enough to make them turn the page and keep going.

There had to be an emphasis on action rather than description. It had to introduce her world to the reader and show a problem that she had to solve as part of her WGO.

It also had to have coffins.

That caused me some consternation. How does one introduce coffins at the beginning of a story without unduly raising the hopes of paranormal fiction fans? I had to make it clear from the get-go that the coffins in question were not for any of the characters' immediate personal use.

In my first three drafts, the story opened at a home sales party for funeral supplies. With so much opportunity for odd, comical, and just plain weird, I was determined to start there.

The more I worked with it, though, the more I realized that the story was being overtaken by that one scene. While the scene was fun, there were key elements that I needed to offer to the reader up front. Those elements just didn't fit at the home sales party.

Besides, I came to realize that throwing all my best lines at the reader in the first few pages didn't make for a satisfying read. Things came together when I introduced my protagonist, established the fundamentals of her character and her problem, and then built on that with further scenes. Readers still came with me to her first home party funeral sales event, but now they arrived with some context.

And then there's what happened *next*. But you'll have to read the story to get that. And hey, if humorous crime fiction isn't your jam, *Hook, Line, and Sinker* has the whole range via twenty-three authors, from noir to cozy and back again.

### **Excerpt from "A Manual for Success"**

Krystal Markham danced from one foot to the other while two men carried a gleaming mahogany coffin through her front door and around the corner into her living room. "Just put it there, on the coffee table," she called. "I've got it all cleared off. All the books are put away and everything. That never happens in this house," she added, in case they thought she was the sort of mother who didn't encourage her child to read.

Quite the opposite. Madison, now sixteen, was an excellent student. Too bad she took after Krystal's ex-husband, Dan. He was about as thrilling as a pair of sensible shoes. Maddie was staying with him for the weekend. The two of them were probably making a spreadsheet or something.

But Krystal had found brochures in Maddie's room from Stanford. Stanford! Was her practical girl secretly yearning for California, and a famous college that neither Krystal nor Dan could afford? It gave Krystal's heart a little tremor of hope to think her daughter might be imagining a life that held . . . more.

That's where the coffins came in.

Sandra Benson has a BA in Creative Writing from the University of Victoria and a law degree from the University of British Columbia, with a detour to Hastings College of Law in San Francisco. She loved practicing law (no, really) but it's time to circle back to her first choice and write something other than contracts. She's a member of Sisters in Crime and their Guppy Chapter for emerging authors.

Now that she has her first-ever story in print in *Hook, Line, and Sinker*, she's all set for her debut novel, *Last Chef Standing*, to hit the bestseller's list. Just as soon as it's finished. She writes from her home near Victoria, BC.

See what's new at <https://sandrabenson.com/>.