Moving from Technical to Fiction Writing

When Your Novel Reads Like a Quick Reference Card

By Margaret Reyes Dempsey, author of *The Benefactor*

What's the rush? Take your time. Set the scene. Or write a screenplay instead. Those were just a few of the comments I received when I showed my manuscript for *The Benefactor* to fellow fiction writers. Truth be told, with just a few formatting tweaks, it could have been a screenplay with its heavy chunks of dialogue floating in a light syrup of narrative description. Nevertheless, an editor saw a glimmer of potential--perhaps the well-placed punctuation--and requested the entire manuscript for review. That was cause for celebration after receiving dozens of rejection letters.

Since the editor had requested a change before submission, I had time to rework some of the weaker scenes. After twenty-two years of writing concise manuals and then paring them down to "just-the-facts-ma'am" quick reference cards, it was difficult to work in reverse and flesh out anemic scenes. The Delete key had been a dear, old friend, but I found myself upstairs, knocking at the door of Insert.

Published author and mentor Julie Compton (*Tell No Lies* and *Rescuing Olivia*) provided encouragement, pointing out where the action moved too quickly or where I had glossed over a setting. Her best advice was just two words but it changed how I approached the writing process. "Slow down." My method until then was to race from beginning to end and then rewrite, pure torture for someone who gets bored quickly. It was like writing the book twice.

In the end, *The Benefactor* was accepted for publication, but I was just getting started. When I began my next novel, I decided to write slower, take my time, imagine the setting and

immerse myself in it, paying attention to the five senses. What resulted was greater than the sum of the parts, a bizarre alchemy in which a new voice and style of writing emerged. I am thankful for what I've learned, but there is much more to explore.

In hindsight, I realize my technical writing background served me well in the writing of the dreaded synopsis, a task that induces tearful wails in many. The synopsis is a summary of the novel that agents and editors read to determine if the story has merit. There's one catch. Whereas a novel must show, a synopsis must tell. Everything you've been told not to do in the novel, you must now do in the synopsis. So you cut through all that great material you added to build the scene and just tell the story concisely, from beginning to end, no cliffhangers allowed. If you do it well, you may be on your way from technical writer to fiction writer.