

The Writing Academy presents the
ultimate guide to writing compelling
novels and short stories for publication
and sale.

Fiction 101

Module Five

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Welcome to Module 5 of Fiction 101

Creating Your Novel's Outline

Now we look at a very practical issue: how to structure your story and create a template from which to construct your novel. I know there are certain writers out there that balk, spit and pout at the idea of creating an outline for their stories but there's a good reason for doing one, even if only in the roughest form.

The reason is simple. Having worked closely with hundreds of fiction writers of all types over the last twenty-odd years I can reveal this pertinent fact:

99% of writers who don't start out with a plan, never finish their novels.

Stressing this point to new writers is frustrating for me. Nowadays I can predict whether an author will finish his or her book. It's simple to work out. If I sense resistance to planning a novel or at least knowing its ending, I can tell the writer will eventually falter. At this point I will usually look skyward, sigh and think, *"What a shame – another author who won't finish the novel."*

It's heart-breaking to know that yet another novel will falter at the quarter point, or three-quarter point (the most common places writers stop) and never see the light of day simply because the author refused to see the benefit of outlining the story.

Let me take a moment to explain why novels falter without a plan.

Free-writing is fine for short works. Not having a plan for short stories is okay – if you write quickly. Even longer works, say up to 50,000 words may work out without an outline. However, longer works of around 100,000 words and over take more time.

And it's the time factor that is crucial. Remember you learned at school that every cell in your body changes within seven years? That, in a sense, every seven years you are a different person?

The same thing is happening to your brain. It is evolving, altering slightly from month to month and therefore, what struck you as a pretty fine idea last year will have flaws for you this year. This is because you have changed. You're a different person. You see things in a different light. It is for this reason, a novel you started writing for all the right

reasons in January may seem like a less than brilliant idea in October – because by then you’ve lost that spark, that sense of rightness, the reason why your vision seemed so clear. In simple terms, you’re older.

Hence, if you have no plan, no outline to remind you where the story should be heading, it’s very easy to get disillusioned by what you’re writing and wonder why it seemed so important to begin with.

Suddenly you find your characters aren’t behaving as they should. They want to go in different directions. Why? Because YOU have changed. YOU feel differently about how your characters should be reacting and how your story is progressing. Not good, or helpful to you as an author.

You need a plan to hold you on course and keep you focused on the fact that you are not writing a work in progress. You are writing the novel you PLANNED to write in the first place. And this is ultimately the only kind of novel you will FINISH.

Lecture over. I hope this helps you understand the importance of a novel outline.

Structure

In the last couple of modules, we looked at characterization and plotting, more especially how to make sure your story is logical and that there is a cause and effect for everything in your novel. This is good for the telling of an average story but we’re after writing with that little something extra – quality, substance, whatever you want to call it – hence the need for a more concrete *structure*.

Structure is what gives your story symmetry and depth. It’s what will set your novel apart from the many others out there. But how do we go about it?

Many long-term writers find that a sense of good structure comes to them almost automatically. They will have an-an-built sense of what is right, resulting from years of practice. For the novice, it’s more of a process that must be learned.

If you haven’t done so already, download and print out the novel template in the next section of this course.

First decide on a working title and place it at the top of the document. Put your name beneath it. Then write a brief description of your story of less than 20 to 50 (max 100) words – a summary if you will, that might appear in a catalogue advertising your book.

Next write down in as few as possible words the theme of your novel, whether it be something as simple as *Love Conquers All* or *Power Corrupts* or perhaps something more specific like *Barney Learns How to Create Happiness from Adversity* or *The Smith Family Triumphs Over Demons from Outer Space*. It's important to describe your story to yourself in straightforward terms because the theme (the book's point) must remain your focus as you write.

Rather than coming up with a theme, you may decide your novel has a message or moral. But be careful here not to think in terms of 'preaching'. At all times the good novelist is objective – as an observer and a recorder. If you do have a message in mind remember that readers like to see both sides of the argument. They don't want to read a book where the writer seems to have an agenda – unless it is a widely-accepted viewpoint like *Good Must Defeat Evil* for instance. Even here, there will be gray areas in some readers' minds.

As a rule, it's best not to 'take a stance' on moral, political, or even environmental issues as a fiction writer as this may undermine your credibility to a publisher /agent/ editor, and may further undermine your relationship with your eventual reader.

Synopsis

At this point, move on to writing a synopsis of your story. It doesn't matter how rough it is but generally it should display the 'arc' of your story. To simplify this notion for yourself, break the story into five distinct parts:

1. *Introduction – where your characters and their situations are introduced.*
2. *First slope upwards – where complications and further developments are shown.*
3. *Continuing slope upwards – where situations and interactions are being pushed to the limit.*
4. *The apex – where all conflicts and dramas intensify and reach a climax.*

5. *The gentle down-slope – where the story is resolved and the characters have reached either safety, enlightenment, a point of growth or death.*

All good stories follow this age-old structure. If you find your own story cannot be broken down into these essential elements it may mean you will have to review your plot (created during the last module). You might also need to change the order of events to ensure your story is not meandering or losing its momentum during its telling.

Make sure you have a satisfactory synopsis before you move on to the next stage. Remember that this is an entirely personal judgment. If YOU are satisfied with how your story works now then, for the purposes of your novel, it works.

Next, if necessary refine your novel's overriding theme and then move on to the outline.

Outline

Using dot points, short sentences or notes, describe your novel from beginning to end. Don't get too hung up on the details you will need to explain later - during the actual writing. Keep focusing on the necessity to describe ALL your novel.

I find it helps to write notes for the beginning, the end, and the middle in no order. Detailing the events and interactions at the end of the story is just as important as the introduction – where, naturally, you might find you are tempted to spend longer because you have more to say. Don't dwell too long on any one section. Get a feel for the whole story. Make it all work – now, before you move on.

As you write, keep your eyes on that theme. Make sure your story, at any point, stays relevant to it. If you notice sections of the story are not in line with the novel's main theme, you have two options. Re-write the theme to better reflect the story's purpose or delete those sections that do nothing to 'prove' or illustrate the theme or 'point' of your book.

The Template

Once you are happy with your outline for the novel, begin to transfer it, or simpler still, copy and then edit it into a working template. Insert chapter headings and structure the events within the chapters to show how your theme is being proved by each successive body of text.

Think of your story as a long series of arguments that will prove a point to the reader.

In the same way as you might structure a simple sentence to advance a proposition, (this is what writing is all about), then you might structure a paragraph to advance a further, more complex proposition.

The paragraph will therefore contain a subject, its context and the point you want to make. The paragraph will hopefully be logical and guide its reader to information necessary to understand that point.

Your chapter will have much the same purpose. It should be a logical succession of paragraphs that illustrate and explain the point you are trying to make in the story.

Therefore, a chapter will have a beginning, middle, and an end that all go to prove your theme or message (or at least part of the ongoing argument that is your novel).

Finally, your finished story template will be the complete 'argument' that proves, point by point, your theme is true to your reader.

Construct your template with the above guidelines in mind and you won't go far wrong.

The Ending

After the first draft of your novel template, which may be anything between 1,000 and 10,000 words, take a good look at the ending.

Make sure that all the story threads are resolved. Also make sure that issues introduced at the end have their roots early in the story. Make sure that characters and events directly 'responsible' for the novel's ending are (and need to be) foreshadowed early on.

If you find that your ending has little to do with the start of your book, you may well need to start again – at least by going back to the plotting and characterization stage – to ensure you are telling a story that is consistent, purposeful, and focused.

The Twist

Story twists are a great way of messing with reader's expectations for entertainment value. However, there are rules. Twists, though unexpected, must always be logical and consistent with what the reader has already been told.

For instance, the identity of a killer in a mystery or thriller is okay to withhold – if there was no way any of the characters (except the killer of course) could have known it before the reader.

Twists must be predictable in the sense that the clues were there for the astute reader. They must be logical except if they are:

Double Twists

This is where a twist is revealed that, if the reader thinks about it, can't be true. The author can then guide the reader back to the 'real' truth that may, of course, be another (believable) twist.

At this point, make sure you do not introduce logic flaws into your manuscript. Sometimes hiding an upcoming twist involves diverting the reader's attention away from it during the story. Most times doing this can make your entire premise unbelievable.

This is, again, a very good reason for completing an outline first.

Continuity

Make sure your finished template makes total sense – if only to you. Get others to comment on it if you like. But only make changes if they make sense to you. Don't change little things just because they seem like a good idea at the time.

Always focus on the big view – the whole story and how it works for you – especially at this moment in time.

If you need to, where there are areas you might need to clarify later, make extra notes outside of the template. Also, when it comes to research, make a note of things you will need to look up or gain knowledge about. But remember that you must *resolve* the issues of research and further notes and *finish* the template *before* you move on.

There's nothing worse than getting half way through a novel and realizing a plot point doesn't make sense without lots of rewriting. Worse, that a simple piece of research would have told you something couldn't possibly happen – thereby invalidating almost everything you've written to that point.

When you are satisfied, your template is complete and proves your point, only then is it time to begin writing that novel. Because by then, you have a potential work of art on your hands. Get to it!

And keep writing!

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