

Writing Your First Novel

By Victory Crayne, Editor

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You finish reading another great novel and daydream about being the hero or heroine in the story. And sigh. "Some day," you promise yourself, "I'm going to write a novel of my own."

Maybe now is a good time. This article will give you the key steps to get started.

With the aging of the Baby Boomer generation, many folks are turning to thoughts of self-achievement, which may include writing a novel. With technical communicators, the inherent English writing skills are already in place and with familiarity with word processors and the Internet, many are reaching out to see what it takes to write the novel they have held inside as a dream for years.

Many find, as I have, that having some creative writing project for their spare time is a good way to unwind after a demanding day or week at work. Most of our time is spent using our left-brain analytical skills. Spending some time using our right-brain creative skills can be a wonderful way to balance our lives. It will help you live longer too.

I have been enjoying writing part-time since 1995 and have participated in several critique groups and writing discussion groups. My genre is science fiction, no surprise if you know I have a bachelor's in physics and math. I have written several short stories, have finished one novel, and am working on my second. It's been a great trip. Yours will be too.

Short story or novel?

Some start out with a short story, one that can be completed in a couple days. A novel takes years of effort on a part-time basis to complete 70,000 to 140,000 words. If you opt for a novel, you will find that the long time it takes is one of your greatest challenges. Of every hundred people who start a novel, only three finish. If your goal is to see if you can write that book you've been dreaming about, then by all means, give it a try. You won't know how you feel until after you're into it. It took me six years to finish my first novel. Read that as six years of pleasure.

When to write?

I recommend you find your best time of day and time of week to write, free from stress. Get up early and write before you go to work, go to a quiet room after dinner, or spend several hours in a burst of writing in seclusion on the weekend. Pick the time and place where you will be free of interaction with others. Turn the television off. Some enjoy writing with a glass of wine or instrumental music. Avoid music with lyrics--you want the words in your story to come from inside your own head, not the words of the songs.

The key is to find a "place" where you can be free of life's distractions, where you can go freely into your creative mood.

Where to start?

Most novels begin as an idea, which may be a special character, a setting, a conflict, or a challenge for a character. Some folks start with a daydream. But a daydream is not a novel or a story unless it has conflict between characters, a change of events or relationships over time, and a resolution. In other words, it has to have a plot, not just a wonderful feeling.

Buying books on writing fiction

You don't have to invent creative writing on your own; many have gone before you and many of those have written books. You can learn a lot by reading some of them. But I caution you against buying too many books right away. Many writers' bookshelves are crammed full of books, most of which they have not read. You can't learn how to write fiction just by reading a 'how to' book. They help, yes, but to learn how to write you must WRITE.

After you have read a few books and started your story, you will learn where you need the most help. That's the time to look for additional 'how to' books.

I also suggest you read some books in the genre of book you are thinking of writing. This will give you an idea of what others have done and what readers may expect in that genre.

Resources

The local bookstore is full of books on writing. The Internet is another great source. You may want to read my articles on writing fiction at www.crayne.com. These include "How to Grow Your Fiction Writing Skills", "Career Plan for Fiction Writers", and "How to Succeed in an Online Writing Workshop". My "How to Critique Fiction" article is used in universities and critique groups around the world, is very popular on the Internet, and is read by about 10,000 people every year.

Writing classes

If you want to jump start your writing skills, attend some classes on creative writing at your local adult education facility, community college, or university. A good one will be one that forces you to write some exercises. You not only get some valuable information from someone who has written, but you will get some experience writing short pieces for your assignments. And best of all, you will get quick feedback.

I stumbled along on my own for a couple years writing stuff that can be described as having an aroma akin to the brown stuff that comes out the posterior of animals. It was

riddled with flat characters, melodrama, dull plots, and unbelievable dialogue. I used to write that smelly stuff at ten miles per hour. Three classes later, I was writing at fifty. The odor was better, too.

The first step: a character with conflict

Start with the main character, your protagonist. Pick a gender, name, role in life, etc. Give him a problem, something he wants or is fighting. Create a reason why he will have great difficulty solving his problem. That often includes people around him who have motives that conflict with his. Your novel will be better reading if your protagonist has some internal conflict, too, something in him that fights his getting what he wants. If he is only a strong character who is predestined to win, you will write him as a flat, one-dimensional character--and he will be boring for others to read.

Create some characters who will give him a hard time or who will be directly opposed to his getting what he wants. You may want to start a computer file on each main character, to which you will add notes as you go along. Create a short description of how your protagonist he will struggle against the others and/or against himself to reach the ending. This is the start of your plot.

How to design a simple plot

There are nine and twenty different ways to design a plot. Two of the most popular formats are the Three Act Play and the Narrative Structure. I prefer the later; your mileage may vary. You may start with one design and change it later. Each story is unique and you don't have to follow any predetermined format.

In the Narrative Structure format, the plot starts with a period of Status Quo, where you introduce the protagonist. Then comes the Inciting Incident, where something happens that changes his life forever. The First Turning Point is the next event, which changes his thinking on how to solve his problems. The Second Turning Point is another conflict in the protagonist. This could be where he makes the conscious effort to behave differently. Then comes the Crisis, the point where he decides to fight or flee. In the Climax, the moment of truth arrives. Finally, there is the Resolution, where the protagonist's main story problem is solved, one way or the other.

You may find it helpful to get a large piece of blank paper and use PostIt notes to briefly describe the events in the lives of the main characters. This method allows you to easily rearrange the notes/events as you develop the design of your plot. I suggest you start first with the story's hero and make your notes to cover his story moving from left to right in time order. Then you can add below his row of notes additional rows of notes, one for each main character. Make sure you put the characters' names at the top of each note so you can keep track of who is who as you move them around with new inspirations. It helps if you line up the notes vertically to match the events in the life of the protagonist. That's where the big piece of paper comes in handy.

Developing your characters

As you write, you will find you need to know more about the characters. Some writers find it helpful to sit down and interview each character, asking him questions to find out what he's like.

I suggest you start a separate file for each person. Start with briefly describing your general ideas about him: name, age, role in the story, occupation, etc. What is his goal in the book? Then create his core traits and values: what are his ambitions, disappointments, strengths, and weaknesses? Next, look for reasons why he can't have what he wants and any paradoxes. Maybe he is very organized and has craves owning his own home, but he also loves to gamble.

It is very important to list his dominant emotions, beliefs, and attitudes. Attitude is very important. This will help you write him as a strong character who jumps off the page. Then try to think of some little details about him that you can write in. People form their impressions of others based a lot on what they look like or how they behave.

Writing scenes

When you are ready to write a new scene, look at your design notes. Pick a character and an event. Chose his attitude, give him a problem, and start writing what he does, says to himself, and says to others. Remember: you are not reporting an event as an objective viewer. Get inside his head. Tell his mini-story showing his emotions, the setting, actions, and dialogue as you live through his mind for that scene. You'll experience the writer's high--and love every minute of it.

And don't forget to show lots of emotion in your scenes.

"No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader." - Robert Frost

Each writer must find his own style. You get to know your characters better as you write their scenes. They will let me know what they like and don't like. Along the way, you may get flashes of inspiration and change the character's plot. You can do that, you know. It IS a creative process. You're not writing a manual here; you're writing a story to entertain.

Remember: you learn as you write. As a matter of fact, you have to WRITE in order to learn HOW to write. You can't get it all from books and lectures.

The famous 'writers block'

Invariably there will come a time when the words won't flow, no matter how hard you try. You've shut the door. You've cleared your desk of everything else. Your computer is

open to the right file or your pencil is sharp with a clean pad of paper. But nothing happens.

"Writing is easy. All you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until the drops of blood form on your forehead." - Gene Fowler

Writers block is probably more of a problem with beginning writers than the experienced ones. Perhaps the reason you are hung up is that you have not prepared your materials enough. Yeah, that's it, you say. You open up your old notes and reorganize for the sixtieth time. But still no flow.

Try this: Turn off the editor in your head and just bang some words. The best cure for writers block is to write. Anything. Remember:

"The worst thing you write is better than the best thing you didn't write." - Unknown

I used to freeze up when I sat down at the appointed hour and nothing would come to mind. Oh my god! What to do? That's where the outline of the plot I described above comes in handy. Review where you were before, look for an event note for a character, and dive into the mind of the viewpoint character. Become him. Feel his emotion. And write his mini-story for this scene. Don't worry about your first draft; you can edit them later. Just bang out some words. Maybe try a glass of wine to loosen your inhibitions. The flow will come.

Join a writer's group?

Writing fiction is a solitary activity. It can't be any other way. There will come a time when you want to talk about your writing and will find that those around you who are NOT fiction writers are of little help. That's the time to seek out other writers. You can also learn from them, but be aware that creative people have opinions. Lots of them. Just because someone has been writing for years or has written a book does not mean he knows how to help you write YOUR book.

Some writers won't get published but love to attend meetings of writers. There will always be folks who like to hang around writers. Who knows? You may be one of them.

Remember this: Don't spend too much time visiting writing groups. You are not writing then. You are writing when you are **WRITING**.

That said, you will find that participating in a critique group to be of great value. Such groups get together to read parts of their stories and get feedback from others. I heartedly recommend you give them a try; the feedback you get will be invaluable. You will also learn how to prepare a critique. (See my article above.) One great benefit of critiquing the words of others is that it makes you more aware of the weaknesses in your own writing. I

have participated in several critique groups and have critiqued the works of perhaps a hundred and fifty writers by now. I can testify it is worthwhile.

The single most important value of getting critiques is in having someone shine their flashlight on outright errors or weak spots in your writing. It is amazing, but no matter how hard you try, you simply cannot see the weaknesses in your own writing. It's that writers high I talked about earlier. It blinds you.

What do you do when you are done with your novel?

If you stick at it long enough, you may be one of the three percent who finish a novel. That's when you get the second kind of high: the satisfaction of having finished the damned thing that has been sucking the blood out of you for years.

It's a rush, I'll tell you. Never before have two little words like "The End" had such a feeling in your life. Enjoy it. You've earned it.

Rewriting

You think it's over just because you finished your first draft? Ha. Think again.

"First drafts are for learning what your novel or story is about." - Bernard Malamud

You will believe it is the best novel ever written; every first-time novel writer does. Sorry buddy, but the real work lies ahead of you.

"There is no great writing, only great rewriting." - Justice Brandeis

"Books aren't written - they're rewritten. Including your own. It is one of the hardest things to accept, especially after the seventh rewrite hasn't quite done it." - Michael Crichton

After you've attended the critique group, gotten someone to give you feedback on every chapter, and spent the long hours rewriting, you finally come to the third writing high. You're done fixing the damned thing.

What do you do next?

The glow from writing that novel will be terrific. You'll walk around with a swelled head for weeks. But eventually the glow will dim. The rush will go away. And a void appears in your life. After all, you gave that novel the best years of your life. What do you do next?

Simple. Start another novel! Keep the writer's high going.

Wrap-up

Well, that's the gist of it, folks. I hope you gained an inkling of how to start and where to go on your journey to writing that novel in you. You will find, as many writers do, that someday you will stand in front of a window and just stare. Others may ask, "What are you doing?" And you will reply with just one word.

"Writing."

- Victory Crayne

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