

A GUIDE TO WRITING YOUR NOVEL

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Welcome to the unique guidebook that can change your writing life from aspiring to published novelist. I say that based on authoring 53 published novels of my own, plus countless novice writers who took my writing classes and then sold their first novel (and sometimes a series of them) with sales in millions of copies. Some of their testimonials are in this book.

What I have taught for about 30 years has proven practical for them, for others and for me. It will work for you if you have an aptitude for writing, will learn and practice your craft, and then persevere to success.

Chapter 2: Overview

This book will help you write publishable novels in today's competitive market. Learn how to avoid literary pitfalls and write well-constructed narratives that keep the editor and readers turning pages. Learn the critical importance of the first page, plus how to write a synopsis, focus on a specific genre, and structure the rest of the book with unusual situations, lovable characters and emotional incidents that captivate readers.

Chapter 3: Characters

Characters exist to create an emotional response in the reader through conflicts in the story. The novel's opening must make us care about the main character. Unless the author creates other believable, three-dimensional characters for whom readers have feelings, the plot (or anything else) will be of little consequence.

Chapter 4: Writing Suspense Novels

Suspense novels are consistently on best-seller lists. Suspense books are not like mystery novels where the responsible is unknown until the ending. This chapter shows how suspense writers let readers identify the adversary early on. Writers raise reader emotions by forcing the protagonist into a life-and-death situation when he races to prove the suspect's guilt before he takes the good guy's life.

Chapter 5: Writing Category Romances

Romance novels have long been the best-selling of any genre. With their countless subcategories, romance novels appear almost certain to continue holding that position. While some selling authors claim their romance novels are not written to a formula, most publishers do have certain standard requirements. By following guidance in this chapter and reading published romances, opportunities are strong for new writers to break into this field.

Chapters 6–8: Plotting Your Novel

The basic function of a novel is to entertain by arousing readers' emotions. Novelists exploit this by a plan (plot) which takes a novel from idea to publication through feelings stirred up in readers by the suspense and conflicts over what's happening to the main character.

Beginning: The start of a story is brief but is the most important. A reader may make a decision to read on or close the book based on the first page or two. These few words set up the entire three-part story structure. The author must quickly hook the reader, introduce a motivated and appealing main character, give viewpoint, show time and location, and present a problem that he must solve for good reason. The rest of the book rests squarely on this foundation setup.

Middle: The long middle section begins with the motivated main character taking the first action toward achieving the goal in spite of conflicts, dangers and high stakes. This initial action always falls short and leads to the next complication and rising tension. Each effort to achieve the focal character's goal plunges him further into trouble and greater suspense, including an epiphany. The end of the middle ends with a crisis where it seems the character cannot possible achieve his objective.

Ending: The brief ending segment shows the main character boxed in with no way out, yet, by using his own ingenuity, he proves his real character in a final desperate effort that achieves his original goal, neatly wraps everything up and leaves readers satisfied.

Chapter 9: Scenes & Sequels

When is a scene needed, and should it be a major or minor one? This chapter shows how to make those decisions. Readers tend to skip excessive narrative and descriptive portions to get to the dialogue. To bring life to a dead page of narration, insert a conflict scene that advances the story, reveals character, conveys important information, raises suspense to keep readers turning pages and leads to a sequel.

Many novice novelists fail to recognize the value of sequels to scenes, but sequels are so important that the writer needs to learn how to properly use them and to include four critical points in each. Those are in this chapter.

Chapter 10: Mystery Writing

Mystery novels follow romances as the most popular genre. This chapter offers guidance in writing a mystery. It is like a jigsaw puzzle with many pieces but no instructions. It is surprisingly easy for a writer to structure a murder mystery. The challenge is how to hide the killer in plain sight until the unmasking at the end. Learn more in this chapter.

Chapter 11: Writing a Mystery Outline

This chapter has an example of how the author outlined a mystery novel for aspiring writers to use as a master plan for their own novels. Mysteries offer substantial monetary rewards for writers who can create a story with an intriguing situation in which danger constantly increases for the protagonist until his own life is in jeopardy from an unknown killer.

Chapters 12–13 Young Readers' Novels Parts 1 & 2: Checklists

Studying these chapters will help show if all the story elements are in the manuscript before submitting it to a publisher. It only takes a few minutes to review what should be in the beginning, the middle and the ending of a manuscript.

Checklist for Writing the Novel's Beginning: Since the way the story starts is extremely important, the novelist needs a checklist of what's in the opening. In addition to knowing the book's genre, summarizing the story in a single short sentence and knowing the beginning setup, the author should check to be sure he knows the answers to other vital questions—before beginning to write.

Checklist for the Novel's Middle Section: The middle starts when the main character makes the first attempt to solve the problem, but this foreshadows the many difficulties he must overcome in the long middle of a story. The primary purpose is to build tension and suspense about how the story's going to end. Guidelines on what helps raise a reader's anxiety must be in the middle. It ends with a crisis which makes it seem impossible for the focal character to achieve his original goal.

Checklist for the Novel's Ending: The short ending section of a novel begins with the focal character facing calamity. If he was racing the clock, that time has run out. He faces complete catastrophe. But he makes a hard decision and acts on it, achieving victory in the end. Rewards and punishments are given, loose ends are tied up, the story question is answered, the theme is proven, and both the main character and the reader are satisfied with the outcome.

Chapter 14: Researching & Interviewing

This chapter urges writers to research to avoid errors, but also to give readers something more than the story line. A careful writer will want more depth than is available online or at the local library. Where possible, interview subjects knowledgeable on the researched topic. This chapter offers suggestions on how to tactfully draw out the one interviewed for unusual facts or incidents. These can challenge a writer's imagination in how to translate that info into a fictitious narrative.

Chapter 15: Marketing

To many writers, the hardest part of writing is marketing. Most novices expect to get an agent to sell their manuscript. That's not realistic. A good agent only gets paid a percentage of what his clients' books sell. A beginner must learn to sell his own work, and that process is detailed in this chapter.

Chapter 16: Which Way Tomorrow?

There was a time when the format and mechanics of a manuscript were so established that they seemingly were set in stone. However, recent dramatic changes have occurred in the publishing and technology fields. It is probably going to be innovative and different for some time. A tighter economy forced some publishers to curtail their book production and author promotion. Remarkable advances have affected print products as electronic and other new technologies surge to the forefront. This chapter guides novelists in how to be aware of present realities and possible new opportunities for a novel in the evolving world of publishing in which we now find ourselves.

Chapter 17: Wrap Up and Challenge

Based on three decades of teaching this material to thousands of aspiring writers, I can say with some certainty who's going to go on using this book to become successful, and who's going to fall short. It isn't always the most talented writer who succeeds, but the ones who have the desire and drive to do what I summarize in my ending remarks. To test your probabilities of success, read the final chapter and take the action recommended there. It's difficult to sell a first manuscript, but it's done all the time.

Prepare yourself to be one who effectively uses this *Guide to Writing Your Novel*.

CHAPTER 3: CHARACTERS

“Make them laugh. Make them cry. Make them wait.” --Charles Dickens

In those few words, Dickens has hinted at the way novelists should write a memorable story: by creating emotions in the readers and carefully building suspense about what happened or is going to happen to the main character and others in a story.

Fictitious characters are the lifeblood of a story. They have names, but unlike those in a phone book, story people must really come alive under the writer’s hand. Characters are absolutely vital to a successful narrative, even more so than plot. Unless the author creates believable, three-dimensional characters for whom readers care, the plot (or anything else) will be of little consequence.

The reason characters exist is to create an emotional response in the reader through conflicts in the story. The novel's opening must make us care about the main character or protagonist so that we root for him to succeed in whatever it is he wants, his story goal.

There must be one central character, usually the viewpoint one. At the end, this character must change by either growing or deteriorating from what he was at the beginning. Readers identify with the main character, who must be likeable with high stakes involved. This character needs two goals: the tangible story objective and a personal or internal one, as a character flaw to be dealt with near the end of the narrative.

Most of all, the readers must get an emotional response from the story. That can be laughter, fear, anger, or almost anything that touches the readers’ emotions.

Emotion sells novels. Feelings are aroused in readers because of the story characters. They are the most important components in a salable novel, especially the main character. Unless readers care about this focal character, the plot or anything else will be weak. The novelist can stir readers’ emotions and quickly pull them into the story by creating conflict between the focal character and a strong adversary.

CHARACTERS IN CONFLICT

A strong opposing character creates ever-increasing suspense for the reader when there is a likeable main character in constant conflict with an adversary. The rule is: The stronger the opponent, the better the story. The adversary can be used to personify evil which the main character eventually overcomes, also vicariously helping the reader overcome evil. A general story-writing rule is that the bad guy wins most of the battles but the good guy wins the war. Very early on (usually at the beginning of a story) the focal character should be introduced with action and a hint of emotion.

CHAPTER 6: PLOTTING YOUR NOVEL PART 1

This chapter is to help you become knowledgeable in the fundamentals of plotting a generic novel. Don't confuse this with a genre or category novel, which has much in common with generic, yet with distinct differences that are detailed elsewhere in this book.

Plotting a novel is the second most critical requirement, following characters. They need something to do, and that is provided in the plot. To teach this subject thoroughly, I've divided it into three logical parts: beginning, middle and ending.

This first session will present guidelines for what is needed in the beginning of a novel.

Middle and ending elements will follow in the next chapters. Using these instructions, the budding writer hopefully will enjoy learning the basics of a well-constructed novel.

The basic function of novels is to entertain by arousing reader emotions through a plan (plot) that dramatizes what happens to the main character in a story. This can be simplified as a story skeleton involving these elements:

1. Situation
2. Problem
3. Character
4. Tries solution
5. Problem worsens
6. Tries again
7. Results in still worse situation
8. Repeats 4, 5, 6, and 7 until a final event makes it seem impossible to solve the problem
9. Character make one last valiant effort and snatches victory from defeat.
10. The situation is satisfactorily resolved.

It is not a formula, but a proven foundation on which the writer's creativity builds a new story. Some writers cringe if someone suggests they write to a formula. However, genre readers (who make up the vast majority of recreational book lovers) consistently prove what they want by what they buy or select from the library shelves. They want a story which is predictable in some ways, as having certain basic elements, and yet which is somehow unique. In fact, readers are so locked into what

they like that publishers have found most books will not sell well if two genres are mixed.

Romance novels with their various deviations (comedy, mystery, suspense, etc.) far outsell other category novels. Yet their plots are as old as Cinderella and as current as today's grocery store racks of contemporary, historical and other top sellers. It's known that some aspiring writers wrote and sold their first romance. So it can happen.

WRITE WHAT YOU LIKE – FIND THE RIGHT MARKET

However, instead of focusing on the hungriest market to start, I'd suggest writing what you read or like most. For me, that's suspense and juvenile stories. I sold 10 adult suspense novels and about 50 juvenile and young adult novels, and had fun doing them.

If you write only for your own pleasure instead of for publication, it's good to learn what goes into a commercial novel. Always try to excel in whatever you do—while enjoying the activity.

After you understand the basics of writing a salable novel, I'll give you the guidelines for writing romance, suspense, mystery or other genres as space permits.

Each category has its own specific requirements, yet the basic story elements are pretty much the same. After grasping these fundamentals, it is a relatively simple step to apply the elements peculiar to a mystery, suspense, adventure, comedy, fantasy or other genres.

THE BASICS OF A NOVEL

Professional writers often refer to the beginning of a story as “the set up.” It has several key elements that begin with the first paragraph and end with a plot point before transitioning to the long middle part of the narrative. Many elements are needed in a story, but several are critical in setting up the story. These literary components do not have to be in any particular order, but they're the foundation on which the whole story rests, so they must be included in the novel's first pages. Those elements necessary in the set up are:

1. **Backdrop:** Time and place sets the background against which the story will be played out.
2. **Situation:** A condition is required that is changed or is about to change.
3. **Problem:** An urgent problem grows out of the changed situation. If an emotional tone can be introduced, the story will have much more reader appeal.

4. **Character:** An appealing but flawed main character is introduced (preferably with action) who is affected by the problem. This is usually the viewpoint character, but not necessarily. Beginners are urged to stick to a single POV because it is sometimes difficult to juggle two viewpoints and make them distinctive. In a single POV novel, everything is told from what the viewpoint character sees feels, hears, etc. The one exception is when another character throughout the story reports what he has seen, heard, etc. Another reason to have one POV character in a novel is because someone must change as a direct result of what happens in the story. Example: If the main character is the one who will change, he could tell lies or be bigoted in some way at the beginning. Something happens in the story (usually in the epiphany near the closing) that makes the character give up bigotry or lying. So stay in one person's skin throughout the novel.

5. **Motivation:** The main character must be so highly motivated that he will stand out throughout the entire book. In my youthful Hollywood days, a television producer of one of the highest rated shows told us in his class that lack of strong motivation was a constant weakness in the freelance scripts he received. Don't lose a novel sale because of weak motivation in characters.

6. **Goal:** The motivated focal character must strive to reach the tangible goal of resolving the problem.

7. **Opponent:** Someone is needed who strives to prevent the protagonist from succeeding in his quest.

8. **Others:** Key secondary characters are necessary to the story.

9. **Consequences:** As soon as possible, establish that the stakes are high and the consequences for failure are even higher. Western author Louis L'Amour declared that life and death are the best consequences.

10. **Mood:** The opening should at least hint at the tone of the story: Will it be light and cheerful, humorous, scary, dark and foreboding, or what? The goal is to create emotion in the reader.

11. **Theme:** This is what the writer wants to say through the story. It is the moral, lesson or "take-away" truth about life. That's why the writer must know the theme before he starts to write. He cannot blatantly preach what he believes. He cannot tack it on at the ending, as Aesop did in his fables. The story itself must subtly teach such immortal truths as "Through a dream and hard work, you can achieve what has never been done before." In addition to what the editor requires as a theme, be prepared for readers who take away something else that was personal to them. I marvel at letters I get proving this.

12. **Plot Point:** This is an unexpected development that surprises the reader and spins the story off in a different direction. To increase reader suspense, several plot

PLOTTING YOUR NOVEL PART 1

In summary of this chapter on the beginning of my novel, Shiloh's situation and problem are set forth and suddenly made much worse than before. So far, all but two pertinent opening elements have been presented. The first missing element is a major decision which will be posed in the next chapter. The second germane element is posing the story question to be answered either yes or no. This question cannot be asked until after the crucial decision. Readers will have to wait for the next chapter to learn what these two opening elements are. Hopefully, readers have now been "hooked" sufficiently that they will turn the page to see what happens next.

Before transitioning to the long middle section of your novel, here are some germane questions to help you be sure you have included most of the critical opening elements.



CHECKLIST FOR THE STORY'S BEGINNING

1. Who is your viewpoint character? Have you limited this to one person?
2. Does the reader have a sense of time and place of the story's beginning?
3. How is the main character introduced who will be affected by the situation?
4. Would this introduction be better if some germane action were added?
5. What is the protagonist's situation which has changed or is about to change?
6. What problem grew out of the situation?
7. Is there a hint of an adversary or threat to the protagonist?
8. Have some important secondary characters been introduced or at least mentioned?
9. Has the first plot point fooled readers' expectations and spun the story off in a different direction?
10. Is the reader likely to be so curious that he will keep reading to find out what happens next?
11. Do you foresee the major decision the main character must make in the next part of the story?

WORKSHOP ON STORY OPENING

To further help you develop your own novel, fill in the proper response to each of the elements usually found at the beginning of a story. They need not be in any special order, but they do need to be in your story.

PLOTTING YOUR NOVEL PART 1

1. **Story arena:** In a line or two, describe the backdrop of where the story starts, such as spring, San Francisco Bay, abandoned ships, floating debris, etc.
2. **Situation:** For your story, what's the condition which has changed or is about to change and cause a problem for your protagonist?
3. **Problem:** In as few words as possible, describe the problem which will require a resolution.
4. **Character:** If possible, introduce your motivated focal character to readers with action and give some indication that he is imperfect but appealing.
5. **Who changes?** As the author, have you already decided which character is going to change from what he is at the beginning of the story to what he will be at the ending?
6. **Others:** Briefly introduce readers to other major characters and hint that at least one of them has some secret.
7. **Opponent:** The adversary does not have to be introduced personally in the opening, but have you considered his possible motive and given some indication of what kind of person he is? This can be done by having someone tell the protagonist about the adversary whom she has not yet seen.
8. **Mood:** Have you planned how to create the proper tone for your story, which will stir emotions for readers by what is going to happen in the story?
9. **Conflict:** In striving to have some conflict in the beginning, will this be verbal, in thought, or what?
10. **Plot Point 1:** Is your first plot point ending the chapter such a surprise to the reader that he will not expect it, and will feel compelled to quickly read on?

With the foundation for writing a novel in this Part 1 chapter, you should be ready to move to the second level on how to write the novel's middle section. Part 2 starts in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 12: YOUNG READERS' NOVELS PART 1

This is the first of two chapters that will teach you how to write and sell novels for young readers. In Part 1, you'll learn some dos and don'ts, something about characters and a plot skeleton, plus more. Other related instruction will be given in Part 2.

The objective of both chapters is to begin preparing you to be among the next generation of writers of quality moral literature for readers ages 8–12, early teens and young adults.

You may not write for these age groups, but sometimes studying material for young readers is helpful in writing picture books and even adult novels. Why? Because all well-told stories have the same basic elements. However, stories for kids are shorter with some distinctive ingredients that make it easier to understand adult writing.

Some of this teaching may be redundant with other chapters in this book, but this is a teaching document, and we learn by repetition. This information should be helpful no matter what your target reading group might be.

Let's begin by looking at some dos and don'ts in writing for young readers.

DO

1. Do open running with the set up, and then speed up from there.
2. Do introduce the warm, likeable but slightly flawed protagonist with action so readers can identify with him.
3. As soon as the situation, problem and story objective are introduced, do promptly start making the focal character head for his goal by facing his first complication.
4. Do write short sentences (25 words or so) and paragraphs (50–70 words).
5. Do start building excitement, suspense and tension by conflicts and events that the focal character encounters.
6. Do use strong verbs to depict the action to raise concern and anticipation about the focal character.
7. Do avoid dull, gray pages by using dialogue that breaks up the page for eye appeal.
8. Do seek to arouse emotion in readers by using words that create a strong image in the mind.
9. Do try to build every chapter so that it ends with a plot point and cliffhanger.

10. Do finish the story on a positive, upbeat note so the reader wants to buy your next book.

DON'T

1. Don't open with a pedantic or static paragraph, but hook readers with some interesting, mysterious, or exciting situation so that the story jumps off with a promising beginning.
2. Don't use a main character with so many unfavorable characteristics that readers won't care about him. If they don't like him, they won't care about your story.
3. Don't take your eye off the protagonist's story objective. Some writers forget that and become hopelessly lost and never finish the story. Go for the goal.
4. Don't use run-on sentences or more than one or two commas in a sentence.
5. Don't let the story become too predictable so readers can guess what's going to happen. Avoid that by keeping readers guessing how the main character is going to deal with increasing complications, conflicts and other obstacles that impede reaching his goal.
6. Don't use inactive, dull or lifeless words; try to make them sing.
7. Don't use stiff, unnatural dialogue in scenes, but keep it lively and real, like a ping pong ball batted back and forth by two good players.
8. Don't forget that readers want an emotional experience, yet also hope for fun and excitement through words that create visual images and touch the heart.
9. Don't let your story sag in the middle, but keep up the excitement, suspense and tension by action, conflict and words that evoke emotion to the ending.
10. Don't drag out the ending, but pick up the pace even more as the story rises to a crescendo of interest, concluding to leave readers with a good feeling.

COMMONALITY AND BASICS OF ALL FICTION

From Bible parables to literary classics and comic books, all have the fundamental narrative elements. These have already been covered in another chapter of this book, but here's a refresher partial list required to start a story:

1. Background (time and place)
2. Character
3. Situation
4. Problem
5. Conflict
6. Obstacles
7. Goal