

STARTING THE WRITE WAY

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Your computer is on, your dictionary and thesaurus are handy, and you're serious. You're ready to jump into the writing field. Good show. But how? What comes first? Many articles and books provide detailed advice on certain aspects of writing, but what's the big picture? Here are few thoughts to get you started.

1) The first issue comes in three related parts. What do you want to write? Why do you want to write it? Who is your target audience?

Could be a memoir for your family. Could be a hot thriller you've been pondering for years. Could be poetry. It's whatever *forces* you to write it, and won't let go until you do.

2) What is the theme of your tale? Love conquers all? Love is useless and we should all become robots? You never want to lecture—preaching is boring in literature—but you likely have a thread that you want to weave throughout the story, resurfacing and subtly resonating here and there.

3) Try to encapsulate your story in a single “high concept” sentence, a “log line,” like the blurb you'd see in TV Guide if they made your masterpiece into a movie. Like theme, this can help keep you focused in all your future writing, even if your tale takes off in unexpected directions once you start writing. (Some do this after the story is done, but it's helpful up front, even if you change it six times before the first draft is finished.)

4) Do you have a title? That can also help focus you, but titles are hard to select, and a publisher may want to change it later anyway. Pick a working title if you can, but don't waste time. You can agonize more when the work is finished.

5) What point of view (POV) is best for your story? Is this something that can best be expressed in first person, like a murder mystery where the only head the reader ever sees into is the protagonist's? Do you need multiple perspectives, so third person limited is best (with section breaks or chapter breaks between the different POVs)?

Note that third person omniscient, where you're switching heads right and left with no warnings to the reader, used to be common. It's still used by a few established authors who can get away with it. But it's less interesting to readers, and agents/editors will often reject any such project out of hand as they consider it demonstrates an amateur who can't yet write well.

6) Know the 3-act structure (and other variations, if you like). 1/4 Act 1; 1/2 Act 2 with a “turning point” in the middle; 1/4 Act 3. Don't be overly strict for prose (this is more applicable to plays and screenplays), but the concept can help you pace a novel and keep your story interesting. Call it trial and error over thousands of years of stories and plays. Some things work better than others, and clever, original ways to tell stories have a great chance of being neither.

Someone else likely already tried it and flopped.

7) Drama is about conflict. Peaceful coexistence is boring. You need to torture your characters, torture your readers. A writer cannot afford to be a nice person (well, not while they're writing, anyway). (heh, heh)

One thing to consider is the difference between what your character wants (say, a promotion and respect), and what they need (say, love). Getting them to realize the need, and decide on a life choice that sacrifices one thing for the other, makes up many classic tales.

And don't just consider the protagonist. Who or what is the antagonist(s)? What do they want? What do they need? How far will they go to achieve their goals? Conflict people, conflict.

8) Set things up and switch directions. Surprise the reader. "A girl scout knocked. Through the glass I could tell she was a well-groomed, sweet young thing. When I opened the door she bubbled, she effervesced, her voice the chirp of a goldfinch. 'Do you know there's a dead lady's head on your lawn?'"

Major switches come when evidence is learned, turning an investigation in a new direction. They come when you find out someone is cheating on another, or in many other ways. Major switches are "turning points." The end of Act 1 often is the point where the protagonist is wrenched from their comfortable world and forced to take action.

The "inciting incident" for a story comes early on, and may not be so much a switch as the shock of a murder on page 1. Of course, if you precede that murder with a gentle scenario, you've got a switch. Depends on what pacing works best for you.

9) Generally, you need to introduce both protagonist and antagonist early on. Late-inserted main characters wrench the reader. If the key antagonist is a major storm at sea that doesn't develop until later, the concept of weather as character, something people must contend with, comes early in the tale. Set-ups and pay-offs.

10) What is your setting? A plantation in the American Civil War? A generic suburb? The scene can be developed into a major aspect of your story, making it essentially a character, or it can be minor, but either way, draw the picture in your reader's head.

11) Show, don't tell. You'll hear the occasional advice from an expert to tell instead, though when they get into the details they're often just explaining a more vivid way to show how characters feel about something, rather than the dull "telling" we should really avoid.

Many have difficulty with the concept, for some reason. Training books have some examples. But in a nutshell, "Bob felt really angry when Angela turned him down" is dull telling. "Bob waited until Angela was out of sight, then threw his favorite lamp against the wall. Damn, he should have waited until she was out of hearing, as well. Not cool."

Here's another detail. Note that if your point of view is clearly within one character's head, you don't need to say "he decided that he should have waited..." or "considered" or "thought" or any other variation on assigning what's going on in his head. Just *be* in his head.

12) Pose questions and don't answer them till later. One idea is to pose a key, outstanding question early in the story and don't answer it till the very end. Easy if you're doing murder mysteries, but harder for other stuff. People ache for the answer, and will stick around to get it, even if they're sure they know it and just want confirmation.

13) Don't start the story too early in time. Most beginning writers develop backstory for their characters—age, education, past relationships, styles and habits, etc. They do world-building, particularly in the fantasy and science fiction fields. Then they start their tale with a dump of all sorts of information they find fascinating and they "worked so hard on." It's all good preparation for the writer, and stuff you may later need, but it's not your story. Delete it!

A great example of how to begin is the first Star Wars movie (#4 in the dating sequence). Luke is living on the farm with relatives, racing, and showing us a brief vision of his world. Then things go to hell. We only learn about his father, the empire, and all the other parts of the universe as they are dribbled out, when and if they are needed.

Remember, the first sentence, the first paragraph, the first page—these have to hook your readers, and be so entrancing they have to stick with you.

14) Flashbacks can be useful. So useful, they're overused by so many writers that you'd better be really good at them or they'll read like a cliché to agents and editors. Avoid, if you can.

15) Many first drafts have too many characters. Consider condensing two or three into a single one. Even dramas based on real life events do this, to simplify things for the reader.

And while you're at it, don't confuse your readers with multiple character names that start with the same letter or sound similar. Having a Vicky and a Becky and a Ricky, having Josephine and Joanelle and JoAnne—these can drive readers crazy thumbing back through pages to see which is which.

16) Make your characters unique. Talking, dressing, and acting differently keeps them clear and is more fun. "A Fish Called Wanda" is a great case of characters with clear and fun distinctive characteristics.

17) Consider pacing. Use comic relief. Don't start with the biggest action in the novel, or the rest will be letdown. Consider your story like entering the foothills, building to bigger and bigger issues with valleys in between, set-backs and dead-ends and reversals, until you scale the final mountain—the ultimate view that resolves the story.

18) Then don't hang around. Keep post-climax prose to a minimum. This may require setting things up in earlier chapters so that you can wrap up subplots neatly and quickly.

19) Avoid dull and unnecessary words. See that “that” in the item above? You don’t need it. Get rid of it in your own writing. Of course, some “thats” are essential for clarity; know the difference.

20) Avoid cliches like the plague. (No, I didn’t make that up, alas.) Or turn them on their head. Or make a joke out of them, like in that newspaper movie where one guy says, “Go ahead. You know you’ve always wanted to.” At which point Michael Keaton hesitates, grins, and yells: “Stop the presses!”

21) Avoid -ing forms of verbs, but not to exclusion. Variety in writing is more interesting. But “when she drove up they were getting out of their own car” can be improved in three ways. “She skidded to a stop. Her parents hopped out and glared at her.”

a) This shows the action as it happens, avoiding “getting.”

b) Phrases beginning with “when” and other weak words should be minimized. “While” and “during” and “then” and any other examples you can think of.

c) The rewrite also uses more vivid verbs, both to keep things interesting and show emotions. Which brings us to:

22) To paraphrase Mark Twain, if you see an adverb or adjective, kill it. “Moved quickly to the door” is nowhere near as good as any number of vivid verbs that might fit. Raced, skipped, etc. A good thesaurus is essential. Especially when you consider that the more interesting words stand out a bit, and you can’t overuse them without driving your reader up the wall, subliminally or otherwise. Variety, and finding the perfect word for a given situation, is most rewarding.

23) Avoid qualifiers. Moderation is boring; extremes are interesting. “She was moderately fast for someone with a bit of a weight problem” isn’t nearly as fun as “She tore out of the house like an elephant after a Planter’s peanut truck.”

24) Obviously, your own original metaphors and similes can be interesting.

25) Use all five senses. Seriously. This is a common weakness for beginners. Scent is often ignored, but texture and etc. all make the scene more vivid.

Except—don’t be overly descriptive. A page and a half describing the living room, or the way someone is dressed, will send most readers running. It also disrupts the flow of the story. Your writing must use moderation, even if your characters don’t. See the difference?

One reason we don’t need to be as descriptive as older prose may be the prevalence of television and movies. Most people have seen a picture of the Eiffel Tower, for example, and don’t need a long-winded description.

26) Don’t overwrite early in the process. Don’t rewrite chapter one again and again to make it perfect. Keep going until the first draft of the whole project is finished. Rewriting, revising, editing, word searching and polishing—these are all later steps, and would be a waste of time

until you know you've got a whole story that hangs together. A highly polished chapter 1 could end up being trashed later, and all that work would be wasted.

27) No overly long dialogue. Rule of thumb: if you need a paragraph break in the middle of one person's speech, it's too long. Add some action as they talk, or a visual, or a joke or misunderstanding by another character. Have them interrupted by some disaster or obnoxious other character. These breaks or "beats" could even flow naturally and fit the conversation, such as mannerisms telling one character another is lying or nervous. Use something, though, to keep your info dump interesting.

Info dumps are always hard to pull off, by the way. Boring. Dribbling things out as they are needed, or in the midst of a high-tension situation, can work better. Never use the mind-numbing ploy of people telling each other what both already know. "As you recall, Carol, we grew up together clear through high school before you moved away." Youch.

28) No all-caps, only rare italics, and restrict exclamation points to dialogue. Make the writing and pacing carry the surprise or shock value. Show characters reacting to things to make their emotions clear. (This is fiction I'm talking about. Non-fiction, especially technical material, may use caps or italics for emphasis.)

29) Don't overuse em-dashes—or for that matter, ellipses So many writers do, that agents and editors come down hard against prose like that.

30) No saidisms. "She said" is invisible to readers, and can even be used for questions. "She asked" is maybe OK (one old professor I know demands it, but he's not an agent or editor). But "she yelled," shouted, expostulated, etc., stops the reader to think about it. Not good.

Even better is to avoid the need for any kind of attribution. Change paragraphs every time you change speakers, and show a bit of action if necessary to clarify who's talking. For example, After 3 lines of give and take with no attributions, you might want to remind the reader who's talking by saying, "Mary dropped the vase. 'You did what?'"

31) Consider time compression. Fiction often keeps up the tension level by collapsing the period in which things happen. Consider the TV show "24." There is no way all that stuff could actually occur within a single 24-hour period, but we don't care while watching the show. It's just fun riding the roller coaster.

32) No coincidences after the first few pages, unless you're writing off-the-wall humor. Coincidences may lead up to an inciting incident, but you never want them to be key in later parts of the story. Your heroes must solve their problems through their own abilities, not by luck.

33) Know the sellable length for the genre you're writing. Middle-grade (MG) is shorter than young adult (YA), which is shorter than adult material. Historical romance isn't mystery. Check out bookstores for what's working for new authors (old hands may be getting away with things a new author can't).

34) Go online and follow advice blogs from a few writers or agents who sound helpful. A few such are linked on my own website, on the “queries and advice” page, to get you started.

35) Get books or magazines on writing and study them. They have details on many of the points mentioned here, and points I’ve not delved into, like developing three-dimensional characters and compelling villains.

Get a style manual. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation are your responsibility, not an agent’s or editor’s. No one said writing was intuitive or easy.

There are also writing classes at many institutions that could help. Writers conventions occur all over the map from time to time, with lectures, seminars, and workshops. All helpful.

36) Read. Lots. Especially in the genre you want to write in, but anything helps give you a feel for the language. Don’t bother trying to publish in a genre you don’t like to read, though. Doesn’t work.

37) However—do consider writing different types of material. Some agents recommend specializing, doing only mystery or YA paranormal, e.g., so you get better at it. But others consider variety to be helpful. A screenplay forces “show, don’t tell.” Poetry broadens your vocabulary and encourages consideration of emotions and senses. Short stories require tight scenes and sharp, clear descriptions. Adding romance to a medical thriller enhances the tale, and everyone wants comic relief, so practice humor.

38) Determine what methodology best helps you write. A few people are “pantsers.” They write “from the seat of the pants,” just starting with a location and some characters with needs/wants and seeing what happens. Others cannot do this, or waste time throwing out much of their material when it doesn’t help the work as a whole.

Many writers outline, planning plot points, character introductions, and where clues become available and how. Their final work may not in any way resemble the original outline, but it helped them get started. Gave them something to work with that got the creative juices flowing.

In Hollywood, people outline, get approval with comments on their outlines, then write a story that jolly well better match that outline if they want to keep working. Sounds hard.

39) Figure out when you’re going to write. Some people juggle ideas in their brains for days or weeks, dreaming about them, pondering while mowing the lawn. Then they dump out a story in record time. Others work best with a more disciplined approach, forcing themselves to sit in front of the keyboard for X hours every day whether something comes out or not. It turns out that if they sit there, denying themselves the ability to get distracted with something else, they do in fact get some good writing done. Whatever works for you.

40) Then find a critique group of writers with similar experience levels. You can all learn together, with constructive criticism (note: *constructive*). It’s amazing how much you can see

needs fixing in someone else's material that you've been glossing over in your own, but once it stands out, you can fix your own stuff as well.

Note that relatives or "best friends forever" may have an impossible time giving you meaningful help. They won't be critical enough. You don't learn from compliments; you learn from being told what didn't work for some reader.

But get multiple inputs. It's amazing how often one reviewer will dislike a section someone else loves. Or you'll get three people telling you three different ways to fix a particular section of your story. The point there is that the section isn't working as written. You may not like any of the suggested fixes, but they've pointed out a section that needs work, and that's the benefit.

Realize that for beginners, and for many pros, rewrites and revisions are easily over ninety percent of the process. Like in any field, you get better with practice.

41) Back up your work. I mean it. Email a copy to yourself so it's on a server somewhere else. Use a pair of USB keys and keep one at a friend's house, switching them now and then so an up-to-date copy is in a second location. Computers fail, houses get hit by lightning. You don't want to risk losing your work.

42) When you think you're done, put your baby on the shelf and do something else for a month. When you come back to it, you will find a few things that lead to the famous "Oh my goodness, what was I thinking?!" reaction. Happens to us all. Time for a few more revisions.

Then ask a beta reader where in the story they just couldn't put it off any longer, they were desperate, they had to put your book down to go to the bathroom. Fix that part, so they can't stop. No mercy!

43) When you're getting near the end, polishing your product, try reading it out loud. You may get exiled to the garage for this part. But reading aloud can make all sorts of edits, typos, redundant word usage, or dumb-sounding phrases leap out at you. A great step before submitting to agents or editors. You want a vibrant, intriguing "voice" to attract those people.

44) When you're ready to submit, to a poetry contest or magazine or agent, research their submission rules and follow them rigorously. They vary widely and are *not* guidelines, even when websites use that word. Proper formatting is essential if you don't want your work thrown out unread. This includes no gimmicks like unusual or colorful fonts, which shout "amateur."

45) And finally, never give up. There's one guarantee: people who give up don't get published.

Good luck, and Keep Writing!