

Back to Basics with 5 Extra Tips for writing your Novel

Write your 1st novel like it's your 3rd with these tips another writer has learned in the process.

Catching the writing bug

To a point, writing gratifies the need we all have to create. It starts out small. A what-if type scenario strikes your mind as interesting. You consider the possibilities of how a story could unfold if it goes this way or maybe that way. You can almost see it in your mind's eye. Something that had a beginning within you has a possibility—a real future—if preserved, and magnified. You start to imagine the possibilities if you could just bring it to life on page. Pen hits paper and the story starts to unfold and then you realize you could be writing for several pages; you even find yourself writing what will become a novel. Here comes the hard part.

Beginning: your first novel

How much are you willing to sacrifice for your creation? This is where novelists set themselves apart from most everyone else. Some may even think you are crazy when considering the intense writing process of creating a novel, especially when considering it seems to make every other writer they know get discouraged, and even depressed at times. But can you know the joy of the extreme highs without the opposition of those extreme lows? If you write for the love of writing you will complete that novel (and maybe more than one novel) because you are willing to persevere and give your all to that creation—against all else.

So take hope. Ride the excitement you feel in the beginning. There will be many ups and many downs in the writing process. Creating a story of life very much parallels life. It is work, sweat, and tears. But anything that is worth it is that way. And this comes from an unpublished novelist; even if you and only you can really appreciate your work (and how much more work it will be than you could ever imagine), it is still worth the joy of the accomplishment. Why else do you think I'm starting on a third novel? Before you strike my advice as insignificant, consider what you might learn from pitfalls you may not have to experience, if you learn from my journey in novel writing.

Middle: my first novel (rising action)

Having written a few chapters to a couple other novel ideas, I found myself interested in seeing how one of those ideas might better be handled in a different format—as a screenplay. Though it had many elements that could beautifully be handled by literary device, I could best envision it displayed on the big screen. It was definitely a self-indulgent task, as I was quite sure that my first writing attempt—of any real length—would not only not become the next great American novel (or even a published novel at that), but certainly I had no expectations that I would break into the movie industry with it. I was writing for the love of writing. Nonetheless, I approached a college professor

whose expertise was in film novels. Frankly, I was only looking to be pointed in the right direction for learning how to convert a story into a screenplay. But he liked my writing so much so that on the spot he asked me if I would consider writing another project; it had been waiting a couple years for the perfect writer to come along and write it. Suddenly I had an agent and I took on the challenge of writing a historical fiction film novel. My thoughts of grandeur were soaring.

Who would have guessed that I was in over my head, but I learned a lot: from the research, from the process, from the agent, from writer's groups, and from published authors I now came in contact with.

More middle: my second novel (conflict & falling action)

I completed my first full novel. It garnered attention from publishers and I received good advice as to how to make it publishable. But to stay true to myself, to my work, and especially to the family that helped me research the material on their father—whom the story surrounded—I decided against fictionalizing reality beyond what might morally be conscionable just to make it publishable. So I set out on my own again to write yet another story. From all that I had learned in writing the first novel, the other two novels I had started on seemed very generic indeed, and I couldn't return to those ideas.

No matter, a writer always has more ideas than we have time to flesh out anyway. I scribbled on a few different ideas for a while, but there was one story of great meaning that tugged at my heart. And I just had to write it. Again, I bit off more than I could chew.

The second novel came together differently than the first. The process was more structured and the result far better, but it didn't get any bites. What held great meaning to me was tough to convey, and still needs a lot of work to reach its intended audience.

Conclusion: my third novel (resolution)

What have I learned? How will I apply it? Will the third time be the charm? These are questions that get me excited about the process, here and now, more than just the outcome of a novel off in the distance. Your story will unfold as a story within the story you are writing, and accentuating the basics will help you to enjoy getting through it.

Tip #1) Start with a great idea.

You would think that this goes without saying, but if there is anything I have learned in the process of writing it is this: a great idea extends to finding an idea that works. I liked both novel ideas that I completed, but for instance, if I had it to do over, I would choose to write the first novel independent of so many outside opinions to satisfy (especially regarding historicity as seen by loved ones). On the second novel I would resist the urge to write a world-changing concept. In other words, find not only a great story idea that resonates with excitement for you and others, but also one that is simplistic in its approach and therefore digestible by others.

Tip #2) Brainstorm and outline

There is a unique balance in writing. If you write the work from beginning to end it is easier to keep up creativity, but harder to make any sense of it. If you plan out all of the details that cover the entire work, it is hard to maintain any creativity to get through it. The creative side wants to just write. The editor must be ignored through that first draft. But free writing the entire book will take longer than if you structure your thoughts first, instead of being forced to do it multiple times in the process anyway.

Take a moment to brainstorm about an idea and what you could do with it. Next, is what I call concepting. You have the idea—the concept—now mold it. Be old-fashioned for a second: pull out a pencil and a paper and write any thoughts that come to your mind about a novel idea. Fragments of information will come out irrespective of order, which is fine; you can puzzle-piece it all together later. Go ahead and write some ideas for what you want to include in various chapters throughout the book.

Now you should outline the work from beginning to end. You don't have to include every single detail, but it is important that you know a conflict and a partial resolution for every chapter. You should have four or five storylines that thread their way throughout the whole of the book. Don't write so much here that you destroy the creative process, but if you outline the whole work you give direction to inspire creativity. If all goes well, you won't be even be able to stop writing on each chapter just to see how you work out the picture of this puzzle you are forming. But also remember that writer's block is just a rite of passage to your best ideas.

Tip #3) Write the most minimal first draft

Now get to work on the novel itself. Figure out a consistency of time and place to write it out. You are working against a clock of enthusiasm for a story that will come together in your mind faster than you will have energy and excitement to see on the page. However, the first draft does not have to be perfect. You don't have to get fancy with description and language. Oh, you will definitely have this urge to stop and rewrite and polish things, but at least finish the creative storyline portion of the chapter before going back and decorating. Your reader has the advantage of consuming a storyline rather quickly, even with all of the extra details, but to satisfy your own appetite for a good story, don't get bogged down in the details early on. Filling in the details later may also seem arduous done all on its own, but it will be far less painful if your basic structure is in place, because overhauling everything (including details) to fix the storyline is much harder.

Tip #4) Review content first

Lastly, once you have the basic idea written out, you are ready for the review process. Make sure you have lots of people review your work. But the first goal is to have them review for content. Print the work out chapter by chapter and as a whole. Check on the storyline and the conflicts and resolutions that should be advanced in every chapter and

as a whole. Read through material and write notes about what you like, what can be improved, and what ideas come to mind for how the story is going, and then maybe where you think it could or should go. Have your reviewers do the same. For the most part you can just read through their notes, rather than reread your work a dozen times over. Rework the storyline again.

Tip #5) Rewrite. Rewrite. Rewrite.

Writing a novel, as you can see, takes more than winging through it, like you might do with a short article. It takes much more planning and work. If you generate a great storyline you will know it and so will a publisher. They will focus on the first couple chapters, as those chapters will indicate whether the structure is there for a great story that can be developed after. Secondary to a great storyline, is the great task ahead to fill in descriptions worthy of your storyline that help the reader imagine it at least as well as you can. You will always know more about your story (beyond the story itself) than the reader ever could, but they should not be left in the dark in being able to picture the parts of the story you reveal to them. Still, the main point here is that the story comes together in layers you add or remove until the most important aspects come to light and then takes life of its own.

Actual Conclusion

Maybe I'll return to those first couple novels, some day. Maybe they are primed for more rewriting. But maybe I could have written the first novel with more structure and the second one with less emphasis on the details and then saved myself a lot of work. Maybe the third one will meet the proper balance, keeping me fresh through a more efficient process, and result in a better outcome—a happy ending. Or maybe, either way, I'll just keep writing.

And maybe your first novel will do all of these things together in perfect harmony, so that your attention to the basics of good plot, character, theme, conflict, resolution, point of view, beginnings, middles, and ends won't go unwarranted either. I would suggest a strong foundation on these areas is also done through outlining each of those areas (like characters or specific conflicts and resolutions), so you have a good idea beforehand of what you have to work with in creating your novel. Just have fun creating; you are making something only you could uniquely create.