



The Weekly Man

How to Write a Novel

I've had several people contact me asking how to write a novel. My advice is: If you really want to write a novel, then do it; if you're *not* absolutely committed to it, then forget it. It takes a lot of time, energy and sacrifice to write a novel. When your friends are out playing in bars, you're somewhere by yourself, writing. When your friends are talking about things they did over the weekend, you have nothing to talk about...other than a world you're creating that your friends know nothing about and, for the most part, couldn't give a damn about. If you have a great story, some might be interested, but not for long. You'll be estranging yourself from your own life. There will be times when you'll be asking yourself why the hell you're writing something that probably no one but yourself is interested in...and are you really interested in it anymore?

Being a writer sucks in so many ways. However, it has its rewards...like when you write a dumb paragraph and then re-write it and read it and think to yourself...did I really write that? It's almost as good as sex. Totally relaxing and satisfying at the same time. And you might even re-write it again and make it even better. It just keeps getting better.

If you don't enjoy writing, and I mean *love* writing, then don't even think about writing a novel. Instead, do something you enjoy that has nothing to do with spilt infinitives...not that grammar is essential to telling a good story. You don't need grammar to write a novel, you just need to love writing. You can hire an editor to correct your grammar.

I taught a writing workshop for 10 years through the UNB College of Extended Learning. It was called Writing Hurts Like Hell, and I even turned the workshop into a book. I taught the same workshop in other places as well and, in the course of a decade, I had well over a thousand students. I know that a few of them have written novels, but I'd be surprised if 20 of them have. It was a great workshop. We met in coffee shops, art studios, bars, parks, city streets...we even had a class in a hot tub. We had plenty of exercises in class and a few assignments to work on at home. Almost all the writing from the students held promise and everyone was enthusiastic.

But as soon as the workshop was over, I'm sure that the writing stopped for the vast majority of students. Some were high school or college students who went on to graduate and pursue careers less morbid than writing. Some were already pursuing careers and, though they'd carved out a portion of that to take the workshop, there was little or no carving to write the actual novel. Life is the death of most writers.

So, do you still want to be a writer and write a novel? Still want to condemn yourself to being the outsider? Are you smiling at the prospect of long hours sitting in front of a computer screen with the lives of fictional characters pouring out of your soul? I didn't think so. Now, go away and do something gratifying and useful, like sell a car or approve somebody's loan.

On the other hand, if you're still crazy enough to want to go ahead with it, here are a few tips.

There's a secret to writing a great novel. Having a story isn't enough. You need people in your story, people that will interest readers and keep them reading. So, that's your first step: find out who the people are going to be and learn as much about them as you can. Know how they react to bad news. How do they shower? What does their bedroom look like? What do they want out of life and what are they willing to do to get it? When you know how your characters will respond even to the slightest incident in life, then you're ready to start building a story around them or place them in a story (with the understanding that, if you know them well enough, they might start changing things).

While you're working on getting to know your characters, carry a notebook around with you. I call this a story dump. Think about that novel you always wanted to write, the one you tell people about at parties and between blankets. It takes about 5 or 10 minutes to talk about it... a catchy start, some exciting action or a compelling situation, an explosive ending. Written up, this would be about two or three pages. Those will be the first pages of your story dump. I use a hardback notebook (it's like a portable desk) and I carry it with me everywhere. Read the first few pages and start asking questions. Why does one of your characters have a desperate look in his or her eyes? Write the question down. You may not have an immediate answer but, by writing the question down, your subconscious will start working on it and in a day or two, you'll have your answer.

You can incorporate your character studies right into the story dump. Carry it around with you everywhere you go. When you're sitting in the doctor's office, take it out and start writing. The idea is to get yourself completely involved with the story, to have it there with you all the time. After a week or two, you'll be on fire with ideas that you get from ideas that you get from ideas. It's like a snowball careening down a slope, picking up scenes and action on the way down. Write about scenes in your novel. If a scene takes place in Venice, Italy and you can't go there, get on Google and go there and make notes on anything that impresses you or can be used in the story (a dark corner with a broken street lamp could be the scene of a murder).

After a month or so, you'll have at least 20 scenes in your story dump. Now, you create a story board. Wherever you can identify a specific scene in your story dump (like an argument, an escape from a killer, a conversation at a funeral) label it as a scene. Now, buy a package of filing

cards and on each of these write down a few notes from the scenes you've identified in the story dump. Just note who's in the scene and the main action (fight, reconciliation, flight from danger). Organize the cards into what you feel is a good chronological order and then tape them onto your living room wall in that order. Leave spaces between the cards for further cards. You might have an opening scene and five or ten spaces before the next scene, and then two or three scenes in a row and then spaces for other things to happen before the next identified scene.

Here's the beginning storyboard for my current novel:



I've redacted the offensive parts. While I was putting these scenes onto my living room wall, I left spaces where I felt there would be a need for earlier scenes leading up to the one I was posting on the wall.

The beauty in the storyboard is that it allows you to see the whole story at a glance. You can quickly determine where you need scenes early in the story that will lead into the later scenes. You'll see where you're missing things and where you've repeated things. The storyboard is one of the quickest and easiest ways to plot a novel.

By the time you've finished your storyboard, you should have a good understanding of your characters and where they're taking the story, and you'll be ready to start.

Pick a place where you can focus on your writing and try to use the same spot all the time. After a while, even when you don't feel like writing (and that will happen a lot), you'll still be able to write because you'll be in the spot where you write. Take one or two of the cards from your

storyboard and write the scene described on the card. Make a few more notes about the scene and start writing. Don't pay attention to grammar or spelling, just write the story. You can edit when the story is finished. Write for an hour or two. Don't write till the sun comes up, especially if you have a job to go to when the sun comes up. If you write for an hour or two each day, you'll have two or three pages each day or 100 to 300 pages in three months.

The idea is to write and write and never stop writing. The more you write, the better you'll get. The method I described here is best for busy people with day jobs, college course, children to raise...busy people. If you're away from the novel for a while, scanning the storyboard will bring up to speed quickly and the cards will be there, waiting for you to write each scene.

On the other hand, you can just sit down at a computer and start writing off the top of your head. Good luck with that.