

Plotting for Pantsers

“I can always fix a bad page. I can’t fix a blank one.” —Nora Roberts

The main goal of this workshop is to help you avoid wasting time staring at the dread blinky cursor. My goal is not to talk you into creating detailed outlines or plans, per se, but more to give you some things to think about before you start writing so you can be more prepared and write better and faster. I want you to be able to write stronger first drafts. These are not hard and fast rules, more tips and recommendations. Every writer is different, but hopefully you can adapt some of this to your own process. We’ll start with the basic building blocks of a novel.

Setting

Ask: Why does the story need to be set in this specific place/time/universe?

Recommendations:

- Draw maps
- Take photos or find them on the Internet
- Google Maps
- Read nonfiction about your setting
- Keep a journal with details about your universe so it’s a handy guide you can refer back to. Start off writing down the basics, then add as you go.

Further Reading:

Setting worksheet: <http://www.katemcmurray.com/workshops/>

A Writer’s Guide to Active Setting by Mary Buckham

Character

Figuring out what your characters will do and where they will go over the course of the story is easier if you have a good handle on who they are. Also think about the bare bones of who these characters are to help get their voices right in dialogue. (Blue collar vs. white collar, wealthy vs. poor, well-educated vs. high school dropout, region of origin—character backgrounds should be reflected in the words they say.)

Recommendations:

- Determine astrological signs, enneagrams, personality types (Myers-Briggs, etc.) of your characters, research how different types are thought to interact with each other.
- Freewrite by throwing your characters into a strange situation or having them have a casual conversation to help get a feel for their dynamic.
- Think about protagonists vs. antagonists. Aside from the plot, how do the characters oppose each other? What is their internal conflict?

- Keep a journal page with character traits: names, motivations, appearance, major damage, personality flaws, tics, virtues, education levels, class, etc. (Or Google “character sheets for writers” to find examples. I rarely fill these out completely because some information is not important, so don’t fret if you don’t have answers to everything, but do try to get as complete a picture of your character as you can, so that he or she seems like a real person to you.)

Further Reading:

Characters, Emotion, and Viewpoint by Nancy Kress

The Emotion Thesaurus by Ackerman and Puglisi

Plot

No need to work out the whole story immediately, but a good way to start is to think about the basics: genre (what is the emphasis: love, suspense, magic, etc.) what is the book’s central conflict, how does the book start, how does it end, how do the characters work together (or oppose each other) to resolve the conflict, internal and external conflicts, how does the antagonist foil the protagonist’s plans, and so on. Understanding plot structure will also help you plot better, write faster, and produce well-paced drafts. (Note: first drafts don’t necessarily need to be written in order!)

Also consider: Is this a standalone book or a series? (And if it’s a series, how far ahead can you plan?)

Recommendations:

- Write a loose outline in paragraph or narrative form.
- Follow a plotting method (Save the Cat, Hero’s Journey/Monomyth, Freytag’s Pyramid, other)
- Make a timeline and/or make a scene list (pro tip: use the index card feature in Scrivener)

Further Reading:

Romancing the Beat by Gwen Hayes

Plot & Structure by James Scott Bell

Save the Cat by Blake Snyder

Freytag’s Pyramid: <http://www.ohio.edu/people/hartleyg/ref/fiction/freytag.html>

Hero’s Journey: <http://www.movieoutline.com/articles/the-hero-journey-mythic-structure-of-joseph-campbell-monomyth.html>

Three-Act Structure:

<http://www.harlequin.com/articlepage.html?articleId=1357&chapter=0>

Jennifer Crusie’s writing craft blog (<https://writingandromance.wordpress.com/>) series on linear structure

Rock Your Plot by Cathy Yardley

Take Off Your Pants by Libby Hawker

Other Things

- **TROPES!** Sure, cliché is bad, but tropes are a convenient shorthand or a jumping off point. Think about character tropes—the cowboy, the Navy SEAL, etc.—and story arc tropes—for romance: friends to lovers, enemies to lovers, billionaire/secretary, bodyguard protectee, etc. Then take each of these elements and put your own spin on them.
- **RESEARCH** first. There's a certain inevitability that things will come up while you write that you'll have to look up, but do the basic background research into the setting, the characters' professions, etc., in advance. You may learn something that will determine the direction of the plot. (Also, if you do have to research something but don't want to lose your writing momentum, [brackets] are your friend.)
- Start with a great **HOOK**. As an editor, one of the things I stumble upon most often is a story that just takes too long to hook me. You want to pull your reader in from the very first sentence. Think about how to start that first scene: *in medias res*, an action sequence, a character saying something outlandish. Once you're hooked on your own story, the words will flow better.
- The **TONE** of the story should match the genre, so think about what voice is best suited for the story: first vs. third person; chatty, witty tone or serious, somber, dramatic. Think about the age of your audience (MG vs. YA vs. NA vs. adult) and what kind of vocabulary is appropriate. Freewrite a few disposable scenes to help nail down the best voice for your project.
- As the writer, you should know far more than your reader does. Plenty of what you know about the story won't make its way into the finished novel, and that's okay. Your **KNOWLEDGE** of the characters, setting, etc., comes across in your writing. (It's also clear when you *don't* know something.) The reader only needs the information required to understand the story, so you don't want to muddy the waters with a lot of unnecessary detail or infodumping.
- Be **FLEXIBLE**: Your story will take left turns, change course, characters will suddenly have traits you didn't plan for. Go with the flow and be ready to make changes to make the story better.
- This is a **FIRST DRAFT** so it does not have to be perfect. Just get the words down and finish the draft, and keep in mind that you can come back to it later, so if anything doesn't work, you can fix it. (NaNoWriMo method.)

BONUS! Recommendations for Writing Faster & Better

A few Cliffs Notes and Takeaways from *2k to 10k* by Rachel Aaron

- Know what you're writing before you write it: sketch out a scene (barebones sketch, not real writing: major plot points, character beats, block out fights, etc.) before you write the scene.
- Record how you're using your time (hours spent writing, word count output, where most writing was accomplished). Helps you work out when your best writing time is, so you can adjust your schedule accordingly.
- Enthusiasm: If a scene isn't working for you, it won't work for a reader, so you should skip it or change it. Otherwise, find the things in a scene as you're planning it that bring you joy or get you excited to write.
- If you are not enjoying writing, you're doing it wrong. If you procrastinate, avoid, chastise yourself, or if it feels like a slog, examine why.
- Writer's block is often born of not knowing what happens next. Take the time to figure out what you don't know so that you can move forward.
- Estimate word counts for scenes/chapters/whole book in advance (which will help with pacing). This is a rough estimate. Don't worry if you're off—you can revise/adjust later.
- Every scene should do three things: advance the story, reveal new information, pull the reader forward.
- Make every word count.

Other recommendations:

Writing Faster FTW by L.A. Witt

The Kick-Ass Writer by Chuck Wendig

No Plot, No Problem! by Chris Baty

Steal Like an Artist by Austin Kleon (for when you need some inspiration)

Romance University: <http://romanceuniversity.org/>

Michael Hauge (workshops, or check the free articles on his website:

<http://www.storymastery.com/articles/>)