



A GUIDE TO WRITING A FICTION NOVEL

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INTRODUCTION

AND HOW TO GET STARTED

Yay! You've decided to write a book! Good for you. If you've requested this guide, it means you've either having some trouble or you're new to writing. That's okay. That's why we're here.

I'm going to take a moment to introduce myself so you know whose advice you're following.

Hi! My name is Erin Lafond, and I'm a professional writer/developmental editor. That means I help people like you develop and improve their novels. I have experience working with all different types of writing and an advanced degree in English.

With that out of the way, how do you get started?

All books start with an idea. If you're here, you probably have some sort of idea, but it's fine if you don't. Maybe you only have a genre or a character. That's enough to get started.

The key to starting a book is to just start writing. There will be a few exercises in this book to help you do just that. This guide will cover multiple lessons such as brainstorming, developing characters and plot, writing the actual novel, and editing.

Let's begin!

LESSON ONE

CHARACTERS

Characters are typically your first step though you are welcome to reverse lessons one and two. However, I always recommend starting with characters because character-driven stories are the best kind. They involve fully fleshed-out characters who have agency and affect the story.

Your characters need three things: basics characteristics, flaws, and desires. I've put a checklist below for the basic characteristics. So, that's covered.

Next up: flaws. Coming up with flaws can be difficult so here is the best tip I have: Often your characters' flaws will just be exaggerated versions of their best qualities. A driven character becomes an obsessive character, etc.

In addition to flaws, you need to know your characters' desires. What do they really want? What gets them out of bed in the morning? If you know what a character really wants, you can deprive them of it or put obstacles in their way, making for an engaging story.

How much you develop your characters usually depends on how big of a role they play in your story. You can just know basic details about minor players or cameos, but you should know as much as possible about your main characters. You want to know the most obscure details, even if those details don't make it into your work (most of them won't/shouldn't). The more you know, the more believable your character is.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT CHECKLIST

The Basics:

Know your character's full name, age, sex/gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, occupation, social class, education, allergies, and physical description (including height, weight, hair/eye color, hair type/usual hairstyle, body build, skin type/complexion, glasses/contacts, marks or scars, preferred clothing, right handed or left handed)

Their relationships:

You should know their parents and how they feel about their parents. While you might not need a full romantic history, you should know the basics or important people. You should know who their best friend is, who they hate the most, and if they have a pet.

Their Past:

Where did they used to live? Where did they go to school? What was their childhood like and how do they feel about it? You don't necessarily need to know every detail, but you should definitely know the things that affected them.

LESSON TWO

PLOT

Let's talk plot.

The primary thing to focus on when it comes to plot is conflict. Conflict makes your story interesting and keeps your reader guessing how things are going to play out. This is where your characters' flaws and desires come into play. These things must come into the plot somehow.

Basically, what does your character want and how can you keep them from it? What obstacles can you throw their way? Regardless of what kind of story you are trying to write, that's what you need to figure out. Stories where characters get everything they want lack tension.

Your characters must make decisions that affect the plot. Whether or not they decide to fight for the rebellion or whether or not they decide to lie to their spouse has to matter. This gives them agency and moves your plot forward. It also gives you a foundation on which to build.

Even if you've started with, "what happens when the governor is murdered in his bed," the story should be character-driven. In this case, the detective deciding to take the case in the first place might lead him down a path he didn't want to go down.

So, what are your characters doing?

LESSON THREE

HOW TO ACTUALLY WRITE IT

All right. You have your characters and your basic plot. You may not have all the details yet, but you have a general picture. Enough to get started. Here are some basic tips:

1) Just start writing. Even if it's bad. Even if it doesn't make sense. Even if you have fifteen adverbs on one page. Just write.

3) Set a daily, weekly, and/or monthly goals. This will help you stay accountable and keep you working consistently.

3) Don't worry about order. You can always go back and smooth things later. Write whatever scene you're dying to write.

4) Write the scene even if you're not sure it'll make it into the final draft. Even if you end up cutting it, writing it will help you keep your momentum. Plus, maybe you'll be able to re-purpose it or keep bits and pieces.

5) If you're really stuck, hand write it first. It helps.

The most important piece of advice I have is: if you don't want to write it, it's unlikely anyone will want to read it. In fact, if you don't want to write it or you're having a lot of trouble figuring out how to write it, that's a serious sign that something needs to change.

LESSON FOUR

REWRITING

So, first things first. Between that last step and this step, take a break. Walk away from your work, and don't come back for at least a week. Relax. Focus on something else. Take a deep breath.

Then, come back because you've still got a long road ahead of you.

This is the stage for big changes that might affect the entire book. This is also the stage during which you might hire a developmental editor (like me!)

Go through your work. Make sure your characters are properly motivated. Make sure your plot makes sense. Make sure that your structure works.

And if those things don't work, rewrite them. Don't edit. Don't just add or cut. REWRITE. From scratch. Get a blank piece of paper, and start over.

Then, read through each and every scene and rewrite any that don't work. This is the time to clean everything up. If you have fifteen adverbs on one page, you need to figure out how to get rid of most, if not all, of them. (Random tip: get rid of adverbs with stronger verbs and nouns.)

Rewrite. It will be hard, but your work will be better for it.

LESSON FIVE

EDITING

If you're really serious about your writing, there are two parts to the editing process: self-editing and professional editing.

Self-editing comes first, and it is an absolutely essential step. We're going from macro to micro here. Now, go through each and every scene and focus on sentence structure. Make sure that everything makes sense. Check your dialogue tags, and check that it's always clear who you're talking about.

Then, go through it again and proofread. Make sure there are no errors in your work that you can see. It seems maybe a little ridiculous, but the draft that goes to your copyeditor should be as perfect as you can make it.

After self-editing comes professional editing done by someone whose job it is to look at your work objectively and help you make it as good as possible. They'll look at sentence structure, consistency, and language. They'll also point out any errors or gaps in your story.

You'll get your beautiful manuscript back with tons of notes. Don't stress. Don't throw yourself a pity party. Just accept that it's part of the process.

Edit. Edit it again. Maybe again for good measure.

Congratulations you have a book ready to be published or sent to agents! Good for you! How are you going to celebrate?