

Planning a Novel

By Michael Amos

Writing a novel should be enjoyable, relaxing, and stress-free. If you plan sufficiently at the outset, you will find the whole process a rewarding exercise in organised daydreaming. Writing a novel without planning is like setting out on a journey without knowing where you're going. At best, you'll meander around aimlessly and eventually end up somewhere interesting, at worst you will get completely lost.

This article outlines the method I use to write my novels. And yes, I really do go through all the steps below, in the order shown. The examples I have used come from my work-in-progress at the time of writing, *The Everlasting Beyond of Eternal Happiness*.

The steps are:

- 1 Define your novel's theme
- 2 Write a rough synopsis
- 3 Write a reference document
- 4 Map out your novel's structure using filing cards
- 5 Start writing

What this article does not cover the craft of writing: characterisation, plot development and so on. Much has already been written on these subjects by far more accomplished souls than myself.

Step one – define your novel's theme

The theme of your novel is important and needs to be written down at the outset. Nobody else but you will ever see this, so it can take the form of a paragraph or two of rough notes. In order to keep your novel focused, everything you write subsequently needs to be written with the theme in mind.

For example, the theme for *The Everlasting Beyond of Eternal Happiness* reads as follows:

"A comedy about sex, death, God and chocolate. The clash between the blind-belief system of religion and the logical proofs of science. The hero is conflicted between his religious upbringing, his sex-drive and his career in research, and is motivated by his loneliness."

You'll notice the above paragraph mentions nothing about the setting. The story could take place during the nineteenth century in Polish zoo. It doesn't matter - what the story is *about* is independent of where it is set. As it happens, *The Everlasting Beyond of Eternal Happiness* is a near future story set in a computer.

As the novel develops in the subsequent steps, you may come back and revise this theme. If you do so, you need to check what you have written during the following steps to make sure it does not conflict with your revision.

Step two – write a rough synopsis

The rough synopsis should be just that, rough! This is not meant to be the document you will later use to pitch to agents and publishers (although it will probably form the basis of that document). The purpose is to provide you with a framework for some serious daydreaming in step four.

You should sketch out all the main elements of the story. I do this in a notepad during my lunchtimes at the day-job (we're not all JK Rowling in it, you know). Just brain-dump everything at this stage but wheedle out the ideas that conflict with your theme (or change your theme).

You should end up with between two and ten sides of A4.

Step three - Set up a reference document

The reference document serves two purposes:

- To guard against inconsistencies - you don't want to accidentally change your hero's eye colour from brown to blue half way through the novel.
- To act as a notepad to record any ideas you are not ready to place yet. If you think of something funny or wise for a character to say, but haven't reached a point in the book where they can say it, you can record it in this reference document.

As with the previous two steps, only you are going to see this document, so do not labour endlessly over it. The point is that it provides you with a reference to avoid inconsistencies in your novel. The reference document should contain the following sections:

Character profiles.

All the major and minor characters should be sketched out in this document. The entry for your characters should include details such as:

- hair and eye colour,
- height, weight, age,
- Ticks, habits,
- Home town and pertinent bits of history,
- Notes on attitude and opinions: is the character a bigot, politically correct, self-opinionated, etc.
- Accent. This is very important - I'll come back to this later in step five.

Often when I'm writing the bio up, things occur to me about the character that I hadn't thought about before, and this can feed into the main plot and subplots of the novel.

As an aside, one of the things my editor insists on is no dialogue tags. "He said" and "she said" are completely out. As a result, whenever you need to identify a speaker, you have an action associated with the dialogue.

So, for example, my editor will not let me write:

Simms said "Mandy, I, I, I never, I never thought..."

Instead, I have to write:

"Mandy, I, I, I never, I never thought..." Little pools of spit accumulated at the corners of Simms' mouth.

These little dialogue actions can be used to say something about your character, and you can make use of the ticks and habits you have recorded in your character profile. As another example, in my novel *The Rocktastic Corduroy Peach*, there is a man with very little social awareness, so he is constantly readjusting his underpants or wiping his nose as he speaks.

Location and setting profiles

Any important settings, clubs or organizations that appear in your novel should be profiled. Again, this is to ensure consistency - you don't want your characters visiting a shop on a Sunday when you've previously said it's closed at weekends. The sort of things I usually list are outlined below but it really does depend on their role within your story:

- Location
- Opening times/meeting dates
- Proprietor's name (if relevant)
- Rough description and any important notes

If you think of a wonderful description of the bar where your characters drink but you haven't reached that point in the novel, you can stick it here for later.

Timeline

Draw a timeline of when things happen. When you first write this, it will be sketchy. Once you complete section four (below), you should be able to revise this and get all your dates correct.

I did not do this step for my first two novels and I had real trouble with the consistency of timing between events.

Step four – mapping out the novel

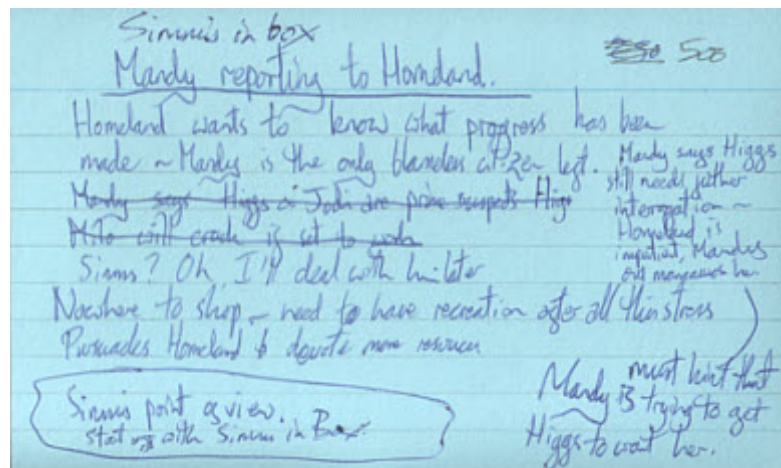
The next step is to plan the whole novel out on 5 inch by 3 inch filing cards. I originally read about this technique in the book "Teach Yourself Screen Writing" by Raymond G Frensham, and I believe it is a common technique used for film and television scripts. The method works very well for novels too.

Using your rough synopsis as a guide, daydream your way through the whole plot, writing a filing card for each scene. Write them quickly – don't labour over them so as to disrupt the flow of your musing.

Each card should have the following:

- A title at the top
- The characters involved
- A brief description of what happens. This will be very sketchy on the first flow through so leave lots of space to add details later.
- An estimate of how many words each scene will be (to the nearest 250 words). If you add these all up, you have an estimate of how long your completed novel will be.
- An indication of the quantity of action/drama in the scene. I do this by using red filing cards for dramatic/action scenes and blue ones for the rest.

An example of a card from *The Everlasting Beyond of Eternal Happiness* is below. You'll see it is a very rough, scribbly note.



The title is “Mandy reporting to Homeland”, underlined at the top. The 500 at the top right is an estimate of how long this scene will be in words. The card originally only had the line “Homeland wants to know what progress has been made - Mandy is the only blameless citizen left.” All the rest of the scribbles have been added later.

Once you have gone through this process once, you will have a great stack of cards - between 70 and 100 for a 70,000 word novel. What you can do now is lay the whole lot out on the floor and see the structure of your novel (see the photo overleaf).

If you have used red and blue cards as I suggest above, you can see where the dramatic moments of action and tension arise at a glance, and so check the pacing of your novel. If you look at the photo overleaf, you can immediately pick out a three act structure!

You can now go through the whole daydreaming process again and again, refining the description on the cards, adding, changing, deleting and rearranging the scenes



as necessary. As you do this, constantly refer back to the theme and reference documents you set up.

You may well find the plot changes away from the rough synopsis you drew up in section two. This does not matter, you can go back and change the synopsis.

Similarly, you will find your characters develop and you can go back and change the character profiles. Quite often, my characters end up doing something they were not supposed to do, like having an unexpected argument. If you can't get them to behave themselves, you have to go back to the stack of cards and make a few adjustments.

I find I have a wonderful feeling of control over the story at this stage. To be able to see the whole thing and physically move the sections around is very liberating.

Step five – start writing

Once you have finished running through your card structure, you can begin the process of writing. Switch on your PC, put the stack of cards next to the keyboard, turn over the first card and start writing, using your notes on the card to guide you through the first scene.

You do not need to worry about the overall structure of the scene because you've already written it down.

You don't need to worry about where the story is going, you've worked that out already.

In fact, you don't have to worry about anything, just relax and write.

I said I would not go into the craft of writing in this article but I will mention one tip I use to check what I've written and, in the process, explain why I mentioned in section three that I give my characters accents.

Once I have written a scene, I always go back through it and read it out loud. Doing this identifies awkward phrasing and poor grammar. This holds true for any writing; I have read this article out loud to myself.

When I get to dialogue in my novel, I read it out in the character's accent. There are three reasons for this:

Firstly, it is fun

Secondly, it cements the character's identity in my head and I don't forget who's talking.

Thirdly, people with different accents say things slightly differently. This translates into subtle differences between your character's written dialogue.

Hey, it works for me, anyway.

Related Articles

If you follow the scene based methodology for mapping out your novel, you can use some of Microsoft Word's functions to help you navigate around your manuscript. This is invaluable once you get past about twenty-thousand words.

A Novel Approach to Word looks at these techniques and can be found here:

<http://www.michaelamos.net/articles.php?aid=1>

About the Author

Michael Amos is an author of *rocktastic*, contemporary comedy and fast, funny science-fiction. He is based in Oxford, the city of dreaming spires in the heart of the United Kingdom.

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