

# How to Finish A Novel

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December 23, 2009  
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The problem with novels is that you can't sit down in one day and complete one from start to finish. (At least I can't. If you can, you have my undying envy.) Novels are long. Generally, a salable length is between 90,000 and 150,000 words . . . and that, fellow writer, is a lot of words.

So how do you get from "Once upon a time . . ." to "THE END"?

These are the techniques that have worked for me.

## **.First, know how it ends.**

This may seem obvious – but then again, maybe not. Back in my days of thirty-page novel starts that never went anywhere, I never knew how the story would end. It was only when I figured this key point out that I finished a novel. (**Hearts in Stitches**, a supposed-to-be funny romance novel about a nurse and an architect that, fortunately, died by fire. Actually, was **killed** by fire. By me. On purpose. Trust me – it was kinder that way.)

You can simply tell yourself, "When I reach the part of this story, the heroine kills the villain with his own sword just as he's about to kill her in front of the bound hero, and then the heroine frees the hero and they both escape from the burning building." You can hold that in your head and work with it, and it may be enough.

If it isn't, go to the next step.

## **Write your ending, and then write to it.**

You may discover, on thinking about your ending, that you can't quite get all the little ins and outs of that climactic scene or series of scenes clear in your head. There may be a lot happening – it can be very tough to keep multiple threads in a complex story straight.

If this is the case, as it often is for me, write the last scene or couple of scenes, or the big climax scene, if you're going to do a bit of wrapping up after that's finished. Pretend the entire rest of the book is done, pretend that everything is already in place, and just start writing.

When you do this, you'll probably discover that there are things you're going to have to put in place earlier in the book so that you can have them available to use during the climax. You know how all those carefully hidden clues in mystery novels suddenly reveal themselves in the last scene, and you smack yourself on the head and say, "I should have seen that coming – how did the writer **do** that so cleverly?" Well, this is how. The writer wrote the ending, then filled up the middle with all the stuff he'd already used, disguising it and throwing red herrings around it so that you wouldn't catch on.

Neat, huh?

But maybe you're having trouble bridging the vast gap between your hot beginning and that elusive end. If so, here's the first way you can get through the middle.

- Create five or six "candy-bar" scenes, and use them to keep you moving forward.**

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First, let me define a “candy-bar” scene. It’s one that you’re just itching to write – something sweet enough that you can dangle it on a stick in front of yourself so that you can say, “When I’ve done these next three chapters, I’ll get to write **that** one.”

If you’re doing fantasy, maybe one of your candy-bar scenes will be the one where the hero discovers for the first time that he can control some magical force or element . . . but that he can’t yet control it very well. You can just imagine the trouble you’re going to cause for him, and how much fun you’re going to have causing it.

If you’re writing mainstream, maybe the thing you’re most itching to put on paper is the moment when your main character discovers that she isn’t alone in the world – that somewhere out there, she has a half-sister . . . and now all she has to do is find her.

If you’re writing romance, maybe the hot-and-heavy scenes are the ones you can use for candy-bars. (Or maybe not. Every time I write a sex scene, I feel like my mom is looking over my shoulder, saying, “And just where did you learn **that**?”)

Make sure your candy-bar scenes are spread out through the book, not all clumped together. Write down a single sentence for each of them. Don’t allow yourself to do anymore than that, or you’ll lose the impetus to move through the intervening scenes.

Even if you have your ending in place and great candy-bar scenes to lure yourself onward, though, there are things that can keep you from finishing. If you’re still having trouble, check out these next few suggestions and see if any bells start ringing.

## **Write about people you enjoy spending time with.**

This isn't the same as writing about people you like. You can really hate some of your characters, but still enjoy spending time with them, simply because what they do is so interesting. You don't use the same criteria for picking story characters that you do for picking friends. But if, every time one of your main characters walks onto the page, your first thought is, "Oh, God – that old bore," it's time to rethink your cast list. Kill him, improve him . . . or just erase him.

## **.Use an outline.**

This is, I know, anathema to many writers. Some believe it makes the process of writing mechanical. Some think it removes the element of discovery from the writing process.

But I've been using outlines since I started. I've only written one book without one (**Sympathy for the Devil**) and I haven't found outlines at all restraining. Remember that an outline is only a map. If you find some unmarked side roads you want to explore once you're moving well, explore them. If you discover an entirely different route than the one you mapped out, take it. My finished books only bear passing resemblance to the outlines that spawned them . . . but the outline allows me to check from time to time to make sure my new route will still get me to my chosen destination.

## **.Allow yourself to be surprised.**

This is for the other half of the writing universe – the half that sticks rigidly to the outline, that takes characters who go off in their own directions as a personal affront, and that feels that the writer must control the story at all times.

Breathe, guys.

Control is seriously overrated. Take this from the person who used to write thirty-page chapters. Not twenty-nine. Not thirty-one. Thirty. Every chapter. I was proud of the fact that I could write a story that would have the exact word count called for in the contract.

Life is too short for that sort of nonsense. And when you're writing, why put yourself on a Procrustean bed and whack off your own feet, just to maintain your rigid sense of control? If your subconscious mind is taking your character in a new direction . . . it's still you. You're still the writer. You can stop the process at any time. But if you don't ever let yourself go off on tangents, you'll never discover the amazing secrets you've been hiding from yourself.

And your writing will be dry and forced, and you may discover that you have less and less reason to finish each book, because you know there will be no surprises.

**·Write because you want to, not because you should.**

Nobody **should** write a book. If writing isn't something you're doing because you love it, don't do it, because it isn't a quick way to riches and it isn't a quick way to fame. It's hard work – the thing you might be finding out when you're sitting down to try to finish your book and hitting the invisible wall.

**·Write what you love, not “what sells.”**

Back to **Hearts in Stitches**, the one romance novel\* I tried. I had this vision of myself as a romance novelist, putting out one book every two months and sitting on a bank account that

would shame Fort Knox. The problem with this lovely image is that I was writing romance not because it was what I loved with a passion, but because I didn't mind romances, and some of them I thought were kind of cute, and I thought they'd be an easy way to make a buck. Here's a little lesson I learned from that experiment – there is no harder money to make than “easy money.” I had to beat myself with a baseball bat to finish that book, and when it was done, it wasn't very good. It was competent – I got personal rejections with comments from each place I sent it – but it lacked heart and soul.

When I moved into SF and fantasy and started writing what I loved simply because I loved it, I started selling. I sold the first book I wrote to the first place I sent it. Which isn't a guarantee that you will do the same. You won't have to hurt yourself to finish your books if you're doing what you love, though. **What you will not do for love, you should not do for money.**

And that's my take on getting from the beginning of your novel to the end. I hope these tips point you in the right direction and make the experience fun and exciting for you.

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**\* An addendum, written some years after this article:** Thanks to a good friend with a vast reading knowledge of the romance field, I discovered romance novels that I do love – some paranormals, some romantic suspense thrillers – and I have come full circle. Along with my fantasies, I'm now writing romance again. Never say never. You can discover things to stir your passion in places you thought you already looked.

**\*\***And an addendum written a decade after the last addendum. You can find my romance [here](#).

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NOTE: Along with all my articles and small classes, I offer a few big classes. If you've dreamed of writing a novel (or

novels) but have never made it to the finish line... or even out of the starting gate, take a look at my ***How to Write a Novel*** class. It's built to take you from "No Idea where to Start" clear through "I finished! ... and I love what I wrote!"

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