

FAQS About How to Write

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- Do I have to have a college education to write?
- How do I stay on track?
- What is a chapter and how do you know when you've finished one?
- How long does a book have to be?
- How do I know when my book is good enough to sell?
- What about the schism between art and commercialism? Do I write for the art, or for the money?
- Is it better to start with short stories and work up to novels, or is it better to start with novels?
- How do you write the synopsis that you're supposed to include with the chapters you send to an agent or editor?

NOTE: I cover writing techniques, why you write, and workshops on other portions of this site. Browse the Articles menu above for those.

Do I have to have a college education to write?

The short answer is "no." The long answer is very long. If you want to know why you don't have to have a college education, and why, in fact, I suspect you'll have a better chance of becoming a professional writer if you don't, [click here](#) for

the essay Experts, Professionals, and College.

How do I stay on track?

I usually get this one from folks who start things well but have a problem finishing them – they either have a lot of good ideas but their stories run out of gas partway through, or they look at what they've done before they finish it and decide that they stink, writing stinks, and life is starting to smell like roadkill too.

This is tough. When I was getting started, I was the author of uncounted thirty-page novels that never made it to page thirty-one. Big plans, no follow-through. I'm not sure what finally got me through those times, but I do remember how I finished my first book, and I think I know why I stalled constantly before that.

I decided when I was around twenty-five that I wanted to finish an entire novel before my next birthday. I sat down and tried to figure out how I was going to do this – I rarely even reached the end of short stories at this point in my career, and the idea of doing two hundred and fifty pages in one project loomed before me like an unclimbable mountain. I figured the number of words I needed (fifty thousand for the genre series book I intended to write). I figured out the number of words I managed to fit on a correctly formatted page. (Roughly 200 in those days.) And I figured out the number of pages I could do in a day when things were going well.

Then I gave myself a page limit, sketched out a tiny little outline, and came up with what I thought would be a pretty

nifty last line.

I cannot overstress the importance of this to the beginning writer who's struggling to finish things. It seems totally unrelated, doesn't it? You ask how to keep on track and I say 'set a page limit for yourself and do a little outline.' But it only seems unrelated.

Your mind is a complex and tricky thing. It looks at the endless plain of a story stretching before you – a plain that you must traverse with no landmarks, no signs, no map and no compass – and it says, "Nope. Not me. Not today. Not gonna do it, don't think that's my sort of thing, I believe I'll stay here by the river where the water's calm and I know the terrain, thank you. Try me again tomorrow, won't you?" And when you try again tomorrow with a new idea, you again present your mind with an enormous, uncharted terrain.

Even the sketchiest of outlines creates a few landmarks for you and a bit of a map to help you navigate. And when you know how long you'd like the book to run and you set a page limit for yourself, you give yourself a compass. It doesn't tell you which way north is, but it does tell you when you're done for the day, and it lets your mind begin planning the terrain you'll cross tomorrow.

As for all those ideas you come up with while you're working – keep a notebook on hand for them if you'd like. I'll tell you a secret, though. I don't usually write down the neat ideas that flit through my mind while I'm writing. The really good ideas will brand themselves on your brain and still be there when you're ready for the next book. The mediocre ones that only seem really good will fall through the cracks and trouble you no more. I don't sweat the ideas I've forgotten. If they were worth my time, I would have remembered them.

And as for thinking that your writing stinks . . . don't worry about it. Just keep writing. You'll get better and your

internal editor will eventually shut up. And then you'll discover that you're a lot better than you thought you were.

What is a chapter and how do you know when you've finished one?

The big secret about chapters is that they're not much of anything but a convenience for the writer, and secondarily for the reader. There are days when you simply aren't getting the pages done that you want and you desperately want to say you've finished a chapter because your brain needs to focus on something fresh. So you come to the end of a sentence, make the next one a cliffhanger, and break. Chapter Two appears and you can tell your significant other that you did an entire chapter in one day. You feel better, the book doesn't suffer, and the next day you get to work on a new character or a different location or whatever.

Technically, a chapter needs two things. It should consist of one or more complete scenes, and something ought to change. (Lawrence Block did some chapters that were only one sentence long, and that constituted the entire chapter. The one that comes to mind is "Chip, I'm pregnant," from one of his Chip Harrison books.) Beyond that whatever you decide constitutes a chapter (and your editor will let you get away with) pretty much does. I was anal about chapters for a while, insisting that each needed to consist of three scenes of ten pages apiece. This was totally unnecessary from an artistic standpoint, but the Procrustean bed I made for myself while I was doing that taught me some important things. First, a writer can fit just about any amount of information into just about any amount of space. Second, that writer will develop a

real feel after a while for the pace of the writing – if you must accomplish a certain amount of action in ten pages, then you will, and sooner or later you'll almost know your length to the exact word count. Third, anyone that anal needs to be smacked upside the head a few times.

I got over that stage eventually. (And you're wondering why I ever got into it in the first place? I was writing ten pages a day and wanted to finish a chapter every three days in order to meet a couple of deadlines. Obvious, huh?)

How long does a book have to be?

Long enough to fit between the covers.

Seriously, though, if we're talking novels for adult readers that are not series books for a specific line (like Harlequin Romances), if you write something that runs from 80,000 to 120,000 words you'll be in the prime marketability range. Shorter than that and the book will look thin on the shelf and have a harder time convincing readers to part with six or seven bucks. This is a thing called 'perceived value' and you will ignore it at your own risk. Longer than that and your publisher will have to invest more in paper and printing for each book, and if it's your first novel and he isn't sure it's going to be a blockbuster, he'll have to worry about getting his money out of it.

For series books, write off and request the guidelines. For children's and young adult books, the lengths vary by age, and since I haven't done any of these, I'm not a good source for information. There are books that can tell you what you need to know.

How do I know when my book is good enough to sell?

This is such a reasonable question, and I wish there were a reasonable answer for it. There isn't. You know when an editor calls your house and offers you money for it. Short of that, there isn't any way to tell. If you believe in your book, keep sending it around (while you work on the next one). The fact that it's gathering rejection slips doesn't mean it isn't any good. The Postman Always Rings Twice got its title from the fact that the way the postman let the author know his manuscript had come home in its little brown body-bag again was by ringing the doorbell twice. That book not only sold (eventually) but made its author's reputation and made everyone involved with it a lot of money.

What about the schism between art and commercialism? Do I write for the art, or for the money?

What schism?

Okay. You have to remember who it is you're talking to here. I am one of very, very few writers who makes a full-time living from my writing and who doesn't do anything else on the side. So there are people who are going to insist that this fact

alone puts me in the camp of the commercial hacks. I think that attitude is stupid, but it is pervasive, and if you want to make money for your writing, you'd better come to grips with the fact that if you do, there are plenty of people out there who will be more than happy to call you a whore.

What you need to remember is that the fact that they believe it doesn't make it true. People write for one of three audiences. They write for their buyers (publisher, editor, agent, readers), they write for the critics, or they write for themselves. You can do good work and write for any of these audiences, but you're just as much in danger of whoring your soul if you try to please academe as you are if you try to please your fans. If you write to please yourself – if you're sitting at your computer telling yourself stories every day that make you laugh, make you cry, make you think – then you're going to do the work that's truest to you. And that may not become critically acclaimed art, or it may not become commercially successful art, but it will by God be art, and it will be yours, and you will sleep better at night for doing it.

Is it better to start with short stories and work up to novels, or is it better to start with novels?

Depends on what you like and what your goals are. If you dream of being a novelist, start with novels and stick with them. If you want to be the next O'Henry, start with short stories. If you love both, do both.

From the standpoint of sales, I've found that it's easier to

sell novels than short stories – there are more markets and they pay a whole lot better. But there are plenty of writers who don't think at novel length, and who would be hurting their work if they spent all their time trying to write novels when they have the sort of mind that bursts with fresh ideas, new characters, and strange twists every day.

How do you write the synopsis that you're supposed to include with the chapters you send to an agent or editor?

A synopsis is a typed single-spaced single page (two at _absolute_ most) that tells the bare bones of your story in present-tense.

Example:

David Wagner has a problem. He comes home to find his house broken into, his wife and children gone, and three dead black mice dangling from their tails on his front door. No note, no signs of violence, nothing else but his family taken. The police cannot find any fingerprints in the house – _any_ fingerprints, not even David's or his wife's or children's. There's no sign of forced entry.

He is, of course, their primary suspect, and he discovers that he's being framed when . . .

Anyway – like that. I was starting to get interested in the idea, and I have to get back to my book. I don't need David

Wagner running around in my head looking for his wife and little Tyler and Griffin and the killer of the three black mice. Go all the way to the end of your story, and write the ending. Don't be coy and leave a cliffhanger, just tell the editor what happens. Leave out dialogue, description, and minor secondary characters.

I'll tell you now, good synopses are hard to write. Plan to spend a week or two getting it down and refining it and clearing out the deadwood. Focus on the action, and on the main characters and the main storyline. And remember that one page is better than two where a synopsis is concerned.

NOTE: If this article resonates with you, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, come hang out with us and make progress on your writing in my free writing community. Learn how writing fiction for a living really works.
