

# Stages of Writing a Novel

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- Idea or Imagination
  - A visualization of the story
- Drafting
  - Developing major plot elements, characters, setting etc.
- Editing
  - Grammar check
  - Style check
- Rewrite
  - Altering plot elements
  - Polishing characters
- Re-editing
- Re-rewrite
- Final Draft

# Ideas or Imagination

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Anything which is created begins with an idea and the imagination of the creator. I often hear writers says they're "looking for inspiration." I think what they're really searching for is ideas. I don't have any magic formula for coming up with a winning idea for a novel, but I'm constantly looking and listening for aspects of the human condition I find interesting. Keeping a daily journal is also a good way to collect ideas.

One thing I've struggled with is coming up with an idea which is also feasible to write about. Sometimes I'll have an idea that is not in itself bad, but I don't have the background, expertise, or clear method of putting the idea into a story. Some ideas have to incubate for a time and I will spend time sorting through ideas to develop main points.

I will usually start a project with a notes page where I'll jot down aspects of the story like setting, conflicts, events, and characters. I'll write character profiles of major characters including their hair color, eye color, temperaments, background, education level, etc. I will typically have much more information about the character in this pre-writing profile than I will in the actual story.

# Drafting

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For me, this is the fun and exciting part of writing. I usually start with a very vague plot based on my notes page of prewriting. After agonizing over the first sentence and first paragraph, I will generally try to write a little each day with minimal breaks. To me, drafting a story is much like reading a novel for the first time. I may have an idea about where the story will go, but there are always surprises along the way. I try to avoid long breaks in writing during the draft phase because I tend to have to re-read and get myself acclimated to the story once I've left it for a few days.

The exception to this rule is when I come to a fork in the road where the decision will alter the ultimate outcome for the characters. I never feel I'm taking a real break during these periods because I'm almost always trying to think my way through the problem. Drafting a story is a lot like putting a puzzle together for me. The more complex the pieces the more interesting, but ultimately the pieces all have to fit and make sense—without seeming contrived.

# Editing, Rewriting— Re-editing and More Rewriting

Drafting a story is the fun and entertaining part of writing. When drafting a story you can develop characters, plot lines, and conflict. You're heading toward an ending and although you, the writer, may have a good idea of how the story will end, you can still be surprised.

Editing and rewriting is the opposite of fun for me. Creating a readable story is much like a mining process. You start out in a raw state like ore coming out of a mine and then you crush and refine the story until it becomes polished and hopefully enjoyable to read.

When I edit, I start by looking for obvious grammatical irregularities. Word processors can be a big help in initial editing. After looking over the grammatical mechanics, I look at style elements and sentences that are clunky (my word, not a technical term). Editing and rewriting is tedious because I think you really have to break the story down to the sentence level. I don't take many breaks during drafting, but will take many during editing and rewriting. I will typically go through this process 5 to 7 times before turning a manuscript over to an outside editor.

I believe this—a story is never finished, only abandoned. Every time I rewrite I think the story gets a little better.

# Editing Tips (Grammar)

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- ⦿ Does your verb agree with the subject?
- ⦿ Are you consistently using the right tense of verb?
- ⦿ Have you used the appropriate punctuation?

## RESOURCES

- Strunk and White, *“The Elements of Style”*
- *“Writing Tools”* by Roy Peter Clark
- Any Freshman level English Composition manual will do.

# Editing Tips (Style)

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- ⦿ Are you being consistent and intentional?
  - Point of view
  - Verb tense
  - Capitalization, punctuation, and word usage
- ⦿ Are you using active verbs whenever possible?
- ⦿ Focus on Nouns and Verbs...supplement with Adjectives and Adverbs.
- ⦿ Are you clear and concise to the reader.
- ⦿ What are your “tics” and watch out for them.
  - Overuse of “that”
  - Overuse of “and”
  - Repetitive words or phrases

# Struck and White *Elements of Style*

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- Place yourself in the background
- Write in a way that comes naturally
- Work from a suitable design
- Write with nouns and verbs
- Revise and rewrite
- Do not overstate
- Avoid the use of qualifiers
- Do not affect a breezy manner
- Use orthodox spelling
- Do not explain too much
- Do not construct awkward adverbs
- Make sure the reader knows who is speaking
- Avoid fancy words
- Do not use dialect unless your ear is good
- Be clear
- Do not interject opinion
- Use figures of speech sparingly
- Do not take shortcuts at the cost of clarity
- Avoid foreign languages
- Prefer the standard to the offbeat

# The Skeleton, Muscle, and Skin

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- ◎ A solid **plot** is the skeleton to an effective story
- ◎ **Characters** are the muscle that gives form to the body
- ◎ **Details** like **foreshadowing** provide the skin to a story that will get attention

Remember, the goal of writing is to get read! A good idea supplemented with good sentence structure, non-confusing grammar, and proper use of literary elements will help achieve that goal. I like to think of a story as a skeleton, muscle, and skin. The little details can add interest and intrigue, but the details must be supported by muscle to give form, and a skeleton that fits together and makes sense. Good luck on your writing project.

*Bob Perry*

# Question?

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If you have questions, I may or may not have an answer, but I almost always have an opinion. You can e-mail questions to [bob@bobp.biz](mailto:bob@bobp.biz) and I'll try my best to give an answer.