

HOW TO

# Write A NOVEL

A 12-STEP GUIDE



## You've always wanted to write a novel.

But something's stopped you.

Maybe you've tried before, only to get thirty pages in and lose steam because:

- » Your story idea didn't hold up
- » You couldn't overcome procrastination
- » You feared your writing wasn't good enough
- » You ran out of ideas and had no idea what to do next

You may be surprised to know that even after writing over 190 books (two-thirds of those novels) over the last 40 years, 21 of them New York Times bestsellers (most notably the Left Behind Series), I deal with with those exact problems every time.

### So how do I overcome them and succeed?

I use a repeatable novel-writing plan—one that helps me smash through those obstacles. And that's what I reveal to you in this definitive guide.

Imagine a finished manuscript in your hands, or your name on the front of a newly published book—does that excite you?

Better yet, imagine letters from readers saying your novel changed their lives, that your words gave them a new perspective. A renewed hope.

If other writers enjoy these things, why not you?

First, you have to write a novel. :)

This guide details the plan I use to write all my novels. I hope you enjoy it and that you can apply it to your own writing!

## STEP 1:

# Nail-down a winning story idea.

Is your novel concept special?

- » Big enough to warrant 75,000 to 100,000 words?
- » Powerful enough to hold the reader all the way?



Come up with a story idea laden with conflict—the engine that will drive your plot.

I based my first novel, [Margo](#), on this idea: A judge tries a man for a murder the judge committed.

Take whatever time you need to sift through your story ideas and choose the one you would want to read—the one about which you’re most passionate. It must capture YOU so completely you can’t get it out of your head. Only that kind of an idea will draw you to the keyboard everyday and inspire you to write the novel you’ve always dreamed of.

## STEP 2:

# Determine whether you’re an Outliner or a Pantser.

If you’re an Outliner, you prefer to map out everything before you start writing. You want to know your characters and what happens to them from beginning to end.

If you’re a Pantser, you write by the seat of your pants. You begin with the germ of an idea and you write by process of discovery. As Stephen King says, “Put interesting characters in difficult situations and write to find out what happens.”

One or the other of these approaches will simply feel most natural to you. But many are hybrids—needing the security of an outline and the freedom to let the story take you where it will. Simply do what makes the most sense to you. (I cover strategies for both types [here](#).)

Regardless, you need some form of structure to keep from burning out after 30 or so pages. I’m a Pantser through and through, but I never start a novel without an idea where I’m going—or think I’m going.

## STEP 3:

# Create an unforgettable main character.

Before you start page one, you'll want to understand your characters.

Your most important character will be your protagonist, also known as your lead or your hero/heroine. This main character must have a character arc, in other words be a different, better person by the end. That means he (and I'm using this pronoun inclusively to mean hero or heroine) must have potentially heroic qualities that emerge in the climax. Your lead can have human flaws, but those should be redeemable.

You'll also have an antagonist, the villain who should be every bit as formidable and compelling as your hero. Make sure the bad guy isn't bad just because he'd the bad guy. You must have reasons for why he does what he does to make him a worthy foe, realistic and memorable.

You'll also need important orbital cast members.

For each character, ask:

- » What do they want?
- » What will they do about it?
- » What or who is keeping them from getting it?
- » What is their role in the main story?

Use distinct names (even distinct initials) for every character—and make them look and sound different from each other too, so your reader won't confuse them.

Limit how many you introduce early. If your reader needs a program to keep up, you may not have him for long.

To be memorable, your characters must also be believable. Inject them with humanity.

If your characters don't feel authentic, they may be missing traits real people possess. Naturally your lead character will face an outward problem, but it's inner turmoil that will make him come alive on the page.

Heroic, inventive, morally upright, and physically strong? Of course. But your protagonist must also face fear, insecurity, inner weakness. Give your readers someone they can identify with, [characters who will develop](#).

Imagine each character's range of strengths, weaknesses, and insecurities before you start writing, and you'll find your job a lot easier.

## STEP 4:

# Expand your idea into a plot.

Would you believe some bestselling novelists don't plot? Stephen King doesn't. And there are others. However glamorous that might sound, here's the downside:

You're not Stephen King. I'm not either.

I love being a Pantser and writing by process of discovery, BUT—even we need structure, if not a formal outline.

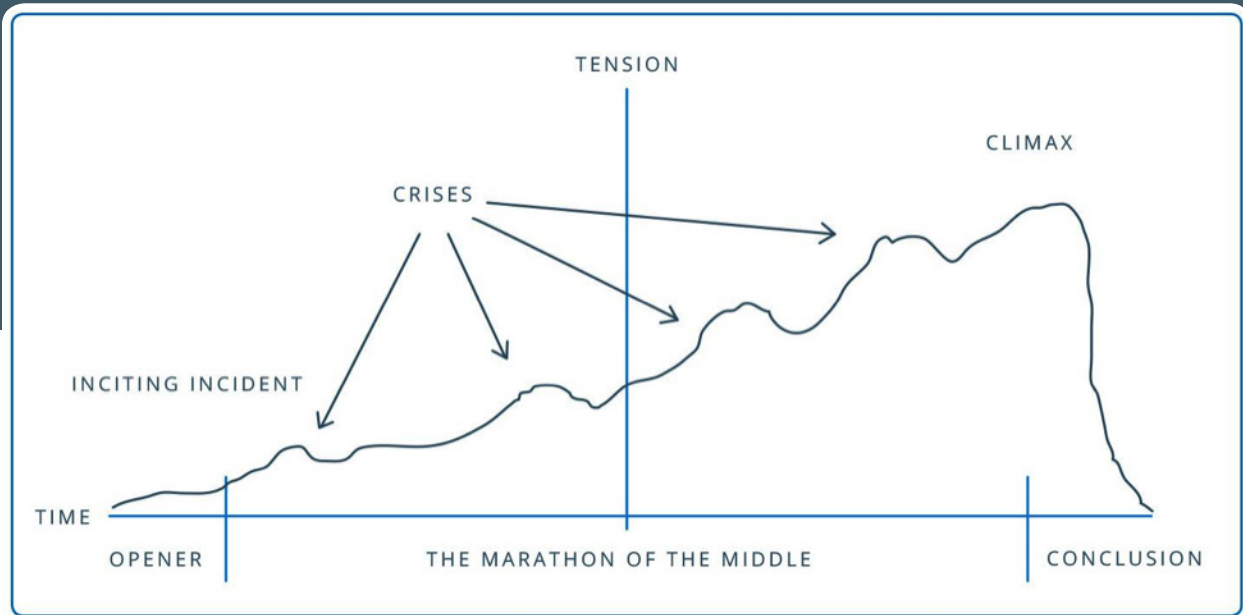
Discovering what bestselling novelist [Dean Koontz](#) calls the Classic Story Structure (in his *How to Write Best-Selling Fiction*) changed my career forever. My book sales took off when I started doing this:

- 1 Plunge your main character into terrible trouble as soon as possible.
- 2 Everything your character does to try to get out of that trouble makes it only worse...
- 3 ...until the predicament appears hopeless.
- 4 Finally, everything your hero learns from trying to get out of the terrible trouble completes his character arc and gives him what he needs to succeed in the end.

## PLOT ELEMENTS

Writing coaches call by different names their own suggested story structures, but the basic sequence is largely similar. They all include some variation of:

- 1 An Opener
- 2 The Inciting Incident that changes everything
- 3 A series of crises that build tension
- 4 A Climax
- 5 A Conclusion



Regardless how you plot your novel, your primary goal must be to grab readers by the throat from the get-go and never let go.

More in-depth plotting resources:

- » [Plot and Structure](#) by James Scott Bell
- » [The Secrets of Story Structure](#) by K. M. Weiland
- » Randy Ingermanson's [Snowflake Method](#)

## STEP 5:

# Research, research, research.

Though fiction, by definition, is made up, to succeed it must be believable. Even fantasies must make sense. Once the reader has accepted your premise, what follows must be logical. Effective research is key to adding the specificity necessary to make this work.

When my character uses a weapon, I learn everything I can about it. I'll hear about it from readers if I refer to a pistol as a revolver or if my protagonist shoots 12 bullets from a gun that holds only 8 rounds.

Accurate details add flavor and authenticity.

Get details wrong and your reader loses confidence—and interest—in your story.

Research essentials:

- » Consult [Atlases](#) and [World Almanacs](#) to confirm geography and cultural norms and find character names that align with the setting, period, and customs. If your Middle Eastern character flashes someone a thumbs up, be sure that means the same in his culture as it does in yours.
- » Encyclopedias. If you don't own a set, you can access one at a library or [online](#).
- » YouTube and online search engines can yield tens of thousands of results. (Just be careful to avoid wasting time getting drawn into clickbait videos)
- » Use a [Thesaurus](#), but not to find the most exotic word. I most often use thesaurus to find that normal word that's on the tip of my tongue.
- » There's no substitute for in-person interviews with experts. People love to talk about their work, and often such conversations lead to more story ideas.

Resist the urge to shortchange the research process.

Readers notice geographical, cultural, and technological blunders and trust me, they'll let you know. Even sci-fi or fantasy readers demand believability within the parameters of the universe you've established.

### One caveat:

Don't overload your story with all the esoteric facts you've learned, just to show off your research. Add specifics the way you would add seasoning to food. It enhances the experience; it's not the main course.

## STEP 6:

# Choose Your Point of View.

The perspective from which you tell your story can be complicated because it encompasses so much. Your Point of View (POV) is more than simply deciding what voice to use: First Person (I, me), Second Person (you, your), or Third Person (he, she or it).

It also involves deciding who will be your POV character, serving as your story's camera.

The cardinal rule is one perspective character per scene, but I prefer only one per chapter, and ideally one per novel. Readers experience everything in your story from this character's perspective.

No hopping into the heads of other characters. What your POV character sees, hears, touches, smells, tastes, and thinks is all you can convey. Some writers think that limits them to First Person, but it doesn't. Most novels are written in Third Person Limited.

That means limited to one perspective character at a time, and that character ought to be the one with the most at stake.

First Person makes it easiest to limit yourself to that one perspective character, but Third-Person Limited is most popular for a reason.

I'm often asked how other characters can be revealed or developed without switching to them as the perspective character. Read current popular fiction to see how the bestsellers do it.

(One example: the main character hears what another character says, reads his tone and his expression and his body language, and comes to a conclusion. Then he finds out that person told someone else something entirely different, and his actions prove he was lying to both.)

For a more in-depth explanation of Voice and Point of View, read my post [A Writer's Guide to Point of View](#).





## STEP 7:

# Begin in media res (in the midst of things).

You must grab your reader by the throat on page one.

That doesn't mean bullets flying or a high speed chase, though that might work for a thriller. It means avoiding too much scene setting and description and getting to the good stuff—the guts of the story.

Les Edgerton, a gritty writer who writes big boy novels (don't say I didn't warn you) says beginning writers worry too much about explaining all the backstory to the reader first.

He's saying, in essence, get on with it and trust your reader to deduce what's going on.

The goal of every sentence, in fact of every word, is to force the reader to read the next.



## STEP 8:

# Engage the theater of the reader's mind.

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Don't moviegoers often say they liked the book better?

The reason is obvious: Even with all its high-tech computer-generated imagery, Hollywood cannot compete with the theater of the reader's mind.

The images our mind's eye evokes are far more imaginative and dramatic than anything Hollywood can produce.

Your job as a writer is not to make readers imagine things as you see them, but to trigger the theaters of their minds.

Give them just enough to engage their mental projectors. That's where the magic happens.

## STEP 9:

# Intensify your main character's problems.

You've grabbed your reader with a riveting opener and plunged your hero into terrible trouble. Now, everything he does to get out of that terrible trouble must make it progressively worse.

Too many amateurs make the hero's life too easy. They give a private eye a nice car, weapon, girlfriend, apartment, office, rich client. Rather, you should pull out from under him anything that makes his life easy.

Have his car break down, his weapon stolen, his girlfriend leave. He gets evicted, his office burns, his client is broke. Now thrust him into a dangerous case. Conflict is the engine of fiction.

Caution: don't make your character a bumbling fool. He can have weaknesses, foibles, flaws, but they should be identifiable, redeemable, not annoying or repulsive. His trouble should escalate logically because of his attempts to fix it.

You can hint that he's developing new muscle and resources that will serve him well in the end, but his trouble should become increasingly terrible until you...

## STEP 10:

# Make the predicament appear hopeless.

Writing coaches have various labels for this crucial plot point. Novelist Angela Hunt refers to this as The Bleakest Moment. It's where even you begin to wonder how you're going to write your way out of this.

The once-reprobate lover who has become a changed man, loving fiancée, falls off the wagon the night before the wedding. Caught red-handed doing drugs and drinking and cavorting with another woman, he sees his true love storm off, vowing to never speak to him again.

Imagine the nadir, the low point, the bleakest moment for your lead character. Your ability to do this will make or break you as a novelist.

This is not easy, believe me. You'll be tempted to give your protagonist a break, invent an escape, or inject a miracle. Don't you dare!

The Bleakest Moment forces your hero to take action, to use every new muscle and technique gained from facing a book full of obstacles and prove that things only appeared beyond repair. The more hopeless the situation, the more powerful your climax and end will be.

## STEP 11:

# Bring it all to a climax.

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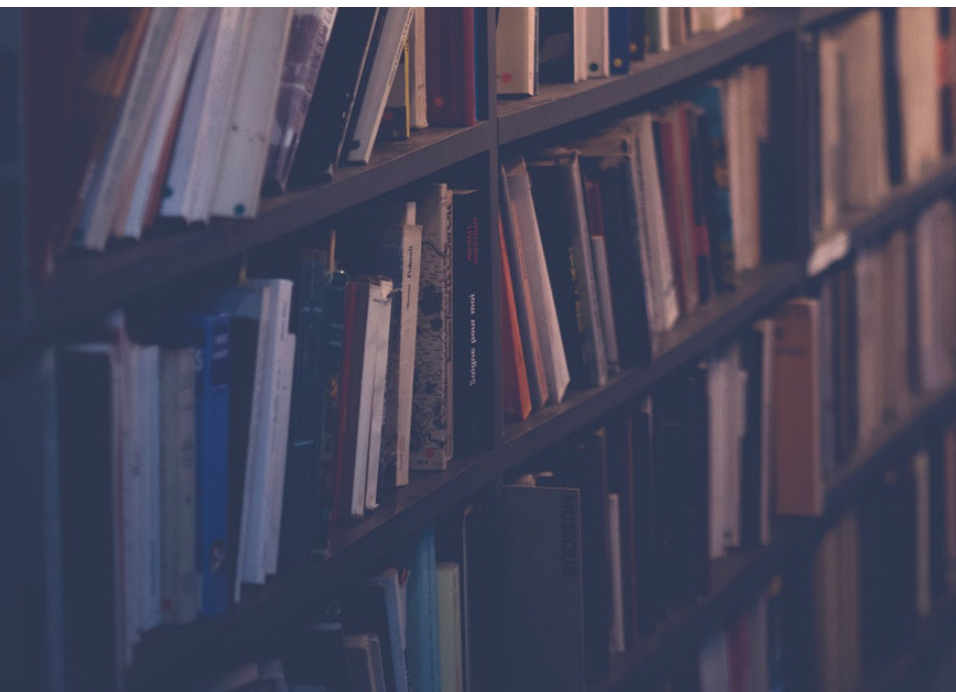
The ultimate resolution, the peak emotional point of your story, comes when your hero faces his ultimate test. The stakes must be dire and failure irreversible.

The conflict that has been building throughout now crescendos to a final, ultimate confrontation, and all the major book-length setups are paid off.

Star Wars: A New Hope climaxes with the rebels forced to destroy the Death Star. In the original version of the movie, the scene felt flat. So the filmmakers added the fact that the Death Star was on the verge of destroying the rebel base. That skyrocketed the tension and sent the stakes over the top.

Give readers the payoff they've been set up for. Reward their sticking with you and let them see the fireworks.

But remember, the climax is not the end. That's still to come.



## STEP 12:

# Leave readers wholly satisfied.

A great ending:

- » Honors the reader for his investment of time and money.
- » Is the best of all your options. If it comes down to clever, quirky, or emotional, always aim for the heart.
- » Keeps your hero on stage till the last word.

Because climaxes are so dramatic, endings often just peter out. Don't let that happen. The ending won't be as dramatic or action-filled as the climax, but it must be every bit as provocative and riveting. It should tie up loose ends, sure, but it also needs to pack an emotional wallop.

Don't rush it. Take your time and write a fully satisfying ending that drops the curtain with a resounding thud.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### 1 / "How long does it take to write a novel?"

First, it takes a lifetime. It will pull from you everything you know and everything you are.

Second, it should take as long as necessary.

I know those answers sound flippant, but my point is, speed is not the point. Quality is the point. How long it takes you to be happy with every word before you start pitching your manuscript to the market is how long it should take.

How long it will take you depends on your goals and your schedule.

A 100,000-word manuscript, including revision, should be doable—even for a beginner—in six to nine months.

Develop and practice the right habits, set a regular writing schedule, and stick to it.

## 2 / “How hard is it to write a novel?”

If you’re anything like me, it will prove the hardest thing you have ever done. If it was easy, everyone would do it.

Every published novelist (yes, even any big name you can think of) was once right where you are—unpublished and unknown. They ultimately succeeded because they didn’t quit.

Resolve to not quit, and you will write a novel. I can’t guarantee your novel will become a bestseller, but I can guarantee it won’t if you don’t finish it.

## 3 / “How do I know if my story idea has potential?”

You’ll know your story has legs if it stays in your mind, growing and developing every time you think of it.

The right concept simply feels right, and you’ll know it when you land on it. Most importantly, your idea must compel you to write it.

Tell your story idea to someone whose opinion you trust. You should be able to tell by their expression and their tone of voice whether they really like it or are just being polite.



## You Can Do This

Don't allow the magnitude of the novel-writing process to overwhelm you. Attack it the way you would eat an elephant—one bite at a time.

Don't let fear stop you. Use it as motivation to do your best work.

Avoid wondering What if...?

Take the leap.

Stay focused on why you started this journey in the first place.

Follow the steps I've given you, and you may find that this time next year, you're holding the first copy of a published novel with your name on the cover.



### **Jerry B. Jenkins**

Jerry Jenkins is the author of 21 New York Times bestsellers, including the popular Left Behind series. He's also written over 185 other books and is sought around the world for his expertise in writing and publishing.

Jerry currently lives in Colorado with his wife Dianna.

