

Retirement-Writing

The Novelty of Your First Novel

Methods of writing a novel vary. At times you will find differences between what you read and what your writing instructors assert. Don't let that disturb you. One of our greatest novelists, Somerset Maugham, said, "There are three rules for the writing of a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are."

Starting on your novel late in life is both an advantage and a disadvantage. (Perhaps that sounds as vague and confusing as Maugham's pronouncement.) The great advantage you have as a retiree is the perspective that only years of living can give us. You have probably developed a far better sense of balance between emotion and reality than you exhibited in your youth. Those are great advantages.

The negative is that all of those years prior to retirement have passed during which you could have polished and repolished your writing skills. But with some diligence as you follow a regular schedule of work, you will steadily improve your writing abilities. Our challenge in the Retirement-Writing Program and in the forthcoming book *The Writer Within You* is to make that process easier and faster.

The Fiction Ladder

While Maugham spoke with tongue in cheek, there is a good deal of truth in what he said. However, what we stress as we try to guide you to success is the basic approach that you will find in almost every successful novel. I call it the *Fiction Ladder* for want of a better term.

It is the process by which the novelist attracts the reader with an intriguing first page by setting a challenge for the protagonist that impels the reader to read on, eager to discover the resolution to the challenge. Next it is vital that the book holds the reader's interest throughout the narrative mid-section of the book until the final resolution. Let's take a look at how that is done.

Building Tension

What you really have is a "ladder" of increasing tension as the protagonist attempts to accomplish the goal of the opening paragraphs. He/she is faced with challenge after challenge before reaching the final resolution. As each obstacle is overcome, the reader moves up a step on the ladder that climbs to the book's ending.

The flow of the book is somewhat of a roller coaster: challenge, conflict, tension, relief over and over again. In each of these episodes, it appears likely that the protagonist may fail. With effort, the obstacle is overcome, and once again the final goal seems attainable, that is, until the next challenge.

If the writer has drawn the protagonist as a likeable and decent character, the reader will be cheering him/her on. Of course, to make these circumstances plausible to the reader, the intensity of the challenge must vary. At times it may be implied.

Sometimes it is the result of the protagonist's doing; other times another character in the story creates the obstacle either inadvertently or with malice. The pattern repeats itself in a variety of ways until the protagonist has reached his/her goal or is ultimately defeated. You will find in almost every case, the novel ends positively.

Climbing the Ladder

Let me give you an example of the ladder approach. I am sure you'll do a lot better when you plan your novel, but this is just a spur-of-the-moment scenario to illustrate my point.

John is eager to quit his job to accept a more challenging and lucrative offer from a competitor (Challenge). If he leaves now, he will forfeit a healthy year-end bonus (Conflict). The problem is resolved when the new employer agrees to compensate John for the loss (Relief). Worse yet, John and the boss' daughter Sue have had a romantic relationship. His departure threatens to destroy it (Tension).

John is in the midst of an extensive research project (Challenge) His co-worker threatens to quit if John leaves, thus destroying the project and making all the effort they have put in meaningless (Conflict). John feels he can't allow that to happen (Tension). Finally he is able to find a highly competent replacement (Relief).

John is finally told he can leave if he agrees to marry Sue and spy on the competitor he will be working for (Challenge). After agonizing self-searching, John refuses once he realizes how devious Sue and her father have become in an effort to steal the competitor's secrets (Tension). John resigns (Relief).

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Be certain to read the next article entitled *Putting It All Together* where we discuss each of the key elements of a novel: Theme, Structure, Plot, Pace, Viewpoint, Characterization and Description. But before we look at those, let's finish this article by answering the questions that I have found novice writers ask most frequently.

How much should I write everyday?

There really is no answer to this question, although it is probably the one most commonly asked. Professional writers usually find themselves averaging somewhere between three to 15 pages. They may spend four hours or up to six or seven at the computer. Under unusual circumstances, writers have been known to go round the clock.

Many factors influence the length. If you are having a tough tussle trying to get the words to flow smoothly, as does happen to all of us at times, your output may be minimal. Or perhaps you just let it flow, knowing full well you will go back and revise extensively the following day.

Conversely, you may find yourself on a roll. The sentences pour out easily and the blank screen fills quickly. It would be a shame to stifle this creativity simply because you're adhering to a schedule. Keep on writing. Don't stop until you've exhausted the muse.

In either case, always remember that two of the writer's most useful tools are revision and rewriting. So don't be afraid to let the words flow. You can always go back and use those two "Rs" to polish them into gems. Length of time or amount of text are really secondary. Far more important is the consistency of your schedule. Successful authors meticulously maintain their schedule of writing.

How should I format my manuscript?

Text should always be double spaced in Times Roman 12 point type. It should be set ragged right. For those unfamiliar with the term, that means the copy is flush to the margin on the left, while on the right, lines end with complete words, regardless of the ragged pattern of the margin.

It is very easy to do this. Go to the upper menu on your computer screen and click on the first diagram to the right of the underline “U.” It shows lines flush left and jagged on the right. Most editors and agents request you write in ragged right style because, they claim, it is easier to read.

How long should my book be?

The majority of books run between 250 and 400 words. The average, I would say, is about 300. But there is no fast rule. The length should be whatever you need to deliver your message well, whether it is fiction or non-fiction, but short enough to maintain the reader’s interest.

How long should my chapters be?

Once again, there is no single response. Chapters usually fall between 10 and 25 typed pages or roughly 2500 to 7000 words. They can be as short as a handful of words or as long as you, the writer, feels you need.

The important thing to remember is that the end of a chapter is a natural break for the reader. If he/she is planning to stop reading, a chapter’s end is usually where it will occur. So be certain to leave the reader with an intense interest in what the following chapters hold. You want him/her to return,

How long should my paragraphs be?

Long enough to contain the relevant information and to maintain the tempo that is suitable to that segment of the story. Action packed and tense sections will have shorter graphs and shorter sentences.

When the writing is more reflective and relaxed, longer graphs and sentences support the mood you are reaching for. While you can find paragraphs of all lengths from

a couple of words to a page or more, the average seems to be in the neighborhood of 10 to 15 lines.

Now turn to the next article, entitled *Putting It All Together*, to learn still more about crafting your work to create a dazzling novel.