

Writing Basics for Beginners is a concise and methodical system to help beginning writers of fiction to know which step to take next, regardless of where they are in their writing endeavors.

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**WRITING BASICS FOR
BEGINNERS**

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE	5
Characters	5
Book Outline.....	8
Plot Points	8
Research Information.....	9
Maps and photographs.....	10
Writing Basics – The elements of a good story	13
Character emotions	13
Plot.....	14
Back story – (flashbacks).....	16
First chapter	18
During the writing process.....	19
Editing your work	20
You as a writer.....	20
CHAPTER TWO	22
Overused words	22
Point Of View (POV) changes:.....	25
Over-explanation that insults the reader:	28
Improper Writing of Dialogue:	29
Comma Usage:.....	33
CHAPTER THREE	39
CHAPTER FOUR.....	54
Writer’s Helps.....	54
Christian Writers’ Market Guide, by Sally E. Stuart.....	56
Glossary of writing terms.....	58
SAMPLE AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY.....	63
AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY	63
Cover Letter	65
Helpful Writer’s websites	65

CHAPTER ONE

Where do I begin?

During new members' introductions to the Christian fiction writers group I belong to, I often find out some people haven't begun writing their book. Believe it or not, just getting started is over half the journey. I am a seat-of-the-pants writer (SOTP). That means I get the basic idea for a book, do the necessary research and then take off writing without an outline. Others fill notebooks with information, plotting exercises, outlines, character charts, etc. before they begin to write their story. Remember, there is no right way, only your way.

I suggest using a folder for each book you begin. Three-ring binders are best for a completely organized writing experience. Using dividers will keep your notes handy and easy to find.

The information you will need to keep in your notebook consists of character charts (I include one with this chapter) for each main character, book outline, plot points, research information, maps and photographs.

I will now address each of the above-mentioned elements of a good writing notebook.

Characters

Characters are tantamount to your story. Without interesting, believable characters, there is no story. Ask yourself the following questions:

Does the character fit the story?

Does the name fit the character?

After asking yourself these questions, create a character chart for each of the main characters. Type the character chart below

into a MS Word document and print off as many as you need for each book you write. Feel free to add spaces or lines as you see fit. Keep each in your notebook for future reference. You'll be surprised how many times you will refer back to it in the course of writing your book. Several times during the writing process, I'd forgotten what color eyes or hair I'd assigned to my heroine. Having it written down in an easy-to-find source will help your characters remain true to themselves.

The better you know your characters, the better your writing will be. We are all mixtures of good and evil, scars and handicaps (some emotional); so don't create perfect characters. A good novel shows us what's going on inside the character and how they react to change.

Get a book on color tones so that you know what colors your characters should wear (i.e. winter, spring, summer or fall).

Get pictures of your characters from whatever source you can – magazines, photographs, drawings, etc. When you find a representation of what you picture in your mind of how your character looks, glue it onto a sheet of paper and file it in your notebook along with their character chart.

Remember, villains must have some good in them and the hero some bad.

Frequently your character's weakest traits will be why they change in the end, and the strongest traits will often get them into trouble the most.

The more different your characters, the less boring your stories will be.

Now let's look at a basic character chart. This not only helps you remember what your character looked like, but some basics about them. This can be as detailed as you wish. I've known writers who write as many as fifty pages on their characters before they begin their book. Again, remember that this isn't a set formula. You need to develop writing habits that suit your writing

style, not someone else's. But a basic character chart will help you build believable characters your readers will either love or hate.

CHARACTER CHART

1. Name of Book
2. Name of Character
3. What is this character's role in the book?
4. Age
5. Height
6. Weight
7. Hair Color
8. Color of eyes
9. Scars, handicaps (physical, mental, emotional)
10. Sense of humor - describe
11. Basic nature
12. What does this character want most (their goal)?
13. Philosophy of life
14. Hobbies
15. Kinds of music, art, reading preferred
16. Favorite colors
17. Educational background
18. Work experience/occupation
19. Best friend
20. Enemies and why
21. Family background (economic, social, nationality, religious, parents)
22. Description of home (physical, emotional atmosphere)
23. What are this character's strengths?
24. What are this character's weaknesses?
25. Sees themself as...

26. Seen by others as...
 27. Most important thing to know about the character
 28. How does character react when in the following situations: angry, sad, happy
-

Book Outline

It is important to outline your book. This could be a simple A, B, C type of outline, hitting the high points in the story, or it could be a chapter-by-chapter summarization containing a couple paragraphs that tell more in-depth what takes place in each chapter. It's up to you.

However, many publishers these days ask for a detailed synopsis of your book when you submit a book proposal. A detailed outline will make writing this type of synopsis much easier.

Place your outline in your notebook to help you keep on track or to not forget important events you'd planned for your story.

Plot Points

These are different from the book outline in that you basically write a blurb detailing some of the major points in your plot and how you plan to introduce them into the story. How will this plot point affect the hero and/or heroine, and what will the outcome be?

For example, you know your heroine is going to be kidnapped at some point in the story. Your plot point might look something like this:

Kidnapping scene:

1. Jane Doe is in her kitchen when the door opens.
2. She assumes it is her husband and turns, but it is a stranger, holding a gun to her head.
3. He forces her to go with him.
4. Jane leaves something in the kitchen that will let people know she was forcibly taken. (You may not know what this is at this point, and that's ok. It may not become clear to you until you are actually writing the book and come to this scene.)

It's as simple as that! Nothing elaborate, but just enough to remind you of how you want your major scenes to unfold.

Research Information

Regardless of whether you are writing a historical or contemporary novel, you will most likely need to do some research. Keep this information together in a separate section in your notebook.

Even in stories set in modern times you will need to have facts about such things as cars, planes, or theaters. The list of things for which you may need accurate information is infinite. For example, if you mention a name brand of blue jeans, you'd better make sure that brand was in existence the year your book takes place. Then, you must find out if this designer minds whether you use their product name in your book.

If you are describing a type of house, you must have your facts correct regarding such things as types of windows, columns, porches, etc.

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If you are writing a historical, and you say the hero sat on a chair, then you'd better have him sit in a chair appropriate to that time period.

Research will make all the difference in whether or not your story is believable to your readers. Have you ever read a book and found yourself saying something like, "Wait a minute! This guy couldn't have put a record on the phonograph. They weren't even invented yet!"

Most of the research I need for a book takes place before I begin writing the manuscript. After briefly outlining the story, I write down everything I think I will need to find out, and then head for the library or the Internet.

Often during the actual process of writing a scene, I discover a tidbit of information I'll need to look up, so I write on a separate piece of paper what it is I need to know and what page of my manuscript this is for, and then continue with my writing. I look up the information at a more convenient time. That way I don't break the flow of my writing.

Maps and photographs

There are two types of settings we can use in our novels – real and imaginary. Either way, a map will help us keep everything in perspective. If you find yourself lost during your writing, imagine how your reader will feel.

Even made-up settings need to be researched. Read enough to set the feeling and tone of your town.

When writing about real places, the streets and landmarks had better be in the right spot. You can print real maps from www.mapquest.com.

When writing one of my books, I had to actually go to a specific intersection in the real town I was using to make sure the

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area was residential because I wrote that the heroine went to a house on the corner.

What about if you are writing about a real city, say Denver, but you have made up a store? This is perfectly acceptable, but if you have that store in a downtown site, then you had better make certain there isn't a famous hotel that has been there for over a hundred years on that spot. Why? Because invariably, someone from Denver will read the book and notice you have a mom and pop shop where this famous hotel has always stood. This could render your entire book unbelievable to this reader.

There is a saying that if you have a good experience, you'll tell three people. If you have a bad incident, you'll tell ten. And with today's Internet technology, blogs, groups, chat rooms, etc., this bad news can spread like a wildfire.

If you make up your town, it will need to be placed somewhere on the planet. Wherever you choose to put your town, you will need to know about the terrain, weather conditions, types of trees indigenous to the area, road access in and out of the town.

When I make up a town I always map out where the streets are, their names, and any other pertinent information about the place. That way, while writing the book, I will avoid the possibility of Harrison Street being the main street in one chapter and Brook Street being the main street in another spot in the book. This assures a consistency in your town that will render it believable.

There have been several famous authors who've invented towns of their own. You know the story is believable when people actually look for that town while vacationing. I've read of this happening countless times.

Whether your setting is real or imaginary, have a map of the area in your notebook to refer to. Also, photographs of landmarks will give you an edge when describing buildings or other places of interest.

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Creating a believable setting will help make or break your story.

Writing Basics – The elements of a good story

Now that you've got your notebook filled with all sorts of information about your story, the main characters, plot and setting, you can begin writing your book. At this time I will address some of the basics a beginning writer must keep in mind when writing a novel.

Character emotions

Characters always act, think, feel and talk, so be sure to use a balance of these things. **SHOW** the reader how the characters feel; don't **TELL**. Words that end in 'ly' tell. For example, let's use the following sentence.

“Wow,” she said excitedly.

What does this tell you? She is excited. How excited is she? We don't really know. This is basically **TELLING** us that she is excited, and it doesn't give your writing much zing.

Try rewriting this same sentence using her body language to **SHOW** us how she is feeling. How about something like the following:

“Wow,” she said, her eyes growing as wide as the pocket watch itself, her mouth dropping open.

Can you see her in your mind as she responds to what is happening? This gives you more of an idea of how excited she really is without telling them the character is excited.

Also, give your characters habits like running their hands through their hair or tapping their pen on the table when nervous, or clenching their teeth when angry. Let the reader see the

character's emotions through physiological aspects such as facial expressions and how they walk.

Below are some common responses your characters will experience. After the emotion are some physiological reactions to that experience.

- Anger – breathing speeds up, heart pounds, jaws tighten, the body prepares to fight or flee
- Sorrow – tears, stooped shoulders, eyes half closed, shaky voice, head down
- Embarrassment – flushed cheeks, looking down at the ground, avoiding eye contact, wanting to hide
- Happiness – big smile, eyes wide and bright, hands clasped, unstoppable tears, eager to hug and does so enthusiastically

Plot

According to the Miriam-Webster dictionary, a plot is the plan or main story of a literary work. Plot implies careful foresight in planning a complex scheme, as in an *assassination plot*.

In other words, the *story* is the sequence in which events occur, while the *plot* is the sequence in which the writer arranges those events (and which events the writer chooses to include).

Below, I list several types of plots. This list is by no means all-inclusive. You will no doubt come across many other types of plots, but this list will get your creativity flowing.

- Plots of chance
 1. Things happen to a character through no fault of his/her own
 2. A character is responsible for his/her own downfall
 3. A character suffers adversity

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- a. Gets through misfortune through his/her own determination
 - b. Survives the misfortune through mere chance and circumstance
- Plots that make up and distinguish an individual
 1. A purposeless character finds direction and strength
 2. A character makes the right choice after many wrong choices
 3. The character suffers a loss resulting in disillusionment
 - Plots of realization
 1. A character undergoes trouble and comes out a better person
 2. The main character must discover the truth
 3. The main character comes to see another character more truly
 4. A character suffers loss and loses faith completely

Regardless of what type of plot your story contains, you must have conflict. Conflict is:

Man against Man: Competitive or opposing action of incompatibles

Man against Self: Mental struggle resulting from incompatible or opposing needs, drives, wishes, or external or internal demands

Man against the world (nature): The opposition of forces other than other people or self

When plotting, give your character a dream, then halfway through the story; pull the rug out from under them. Take their dream away or put a roadblock so huge, they feel they will never achieve their goals. Then at the last minute the conflict is resolved, either in a good way or bad.

Remember to make the trouble most intense near the end of the story.

Create a cliffhanger at the end of each chapter. Always leave the reader wanting more – now! We want them to be so enthralled with our book, they will lose track of the time and read our story when they should be sleeping at night.

Back story – (flashbacks)

It is not a good idea to start a book with back-story; otherwise the reader becomes confused when you suddenly jump back to the present. If you must begin with a flashback, perhaps it would best to put it in a prologue.

Flashbacks are good ways to tell the reader more about the character's motivation, but use them only when the scene is slowing down – never in the middle of tension. They stop the action. If it works, that's good. If it doesn't work, get rid of it.

When using back-story, use past perfect tense at the first sentence or two, and then go to regular past tense. For example:

Jane leaned against the window, flashes of John running through her mind. The glass felt cool against her forehead. She remembered the day he brought her there.

John had just bought that flashy blue sports car, and had apparently wanted the whole neighborhood to know it. He drove up to Jane's parent's house and honked the horn loud and long to get everyone's attention.

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“All right! We know you’re here!” she called from her upstairs bedroom window.

“Come on down and I’ll give you a ride.”

She did his bidding and soon they were driving through the streets of the city.

“Where are we going?” Jane asked when he turned off the highway onto a rocky lane on the outskirts of town.

“You’ll see.”

Jane watched trees, wildflowers and tall grasses that had never seen a lawnmower as they sped by the landscape. John drove up to a small two-story white house with an equally white picket fence. She held her breath. This was it! Their dream home!

Now, twenty years later, she couldn’t imagine herself living anywhere else. The rooms held so many memories – their memories of a life they’d built together. This old house spoke of John everywhere she looked, and it comforted her.

In the above scene, the first and last paragraphs are written to show what is actually happening now in the story. They are written in third person past tense. The rest is considered back-story or a flashback. Note in the second paragraph the tense is past perfect and uses ‘had’ to denote that this section is going back even further in time.

Then from the third paragraph until the last, I reverted back to the same tense as the first paragraph, even though we are still in the flashback. You don’t need to use ‘had’ through the entire flashback, as it would bog down the scene with unnecessary words.

First chapter

There are a few necessities a writer must be aware of when writing a novel. The first chapter must contain certain elements of the story.

The first chapter sets the mood of the entire book. Although the cover will reveal much about the book, you must write the first chapter as if there would be no cover. The reader will discover the following in the first chapter:

1. Is it a mystery, suspense, romance, comedy, etc.?
2. What time period is the story taking place: western, contemporary, regency, medieval, early Roman, etc.?
3. Is this light reading or deep and thought provoking?

The main characters must be introduced in the first chapter. It is best if the reader gets a physical description of the characters and what their main goals are. You want the reader to be able to picture the main characters in their minds as early as possible. That way as the story unfolds, the reader can 'see' them going through each event.

The reader should know by the end of the first chapter what main conflicts the characters are facing, or a foreshadowing of what they are going to face.

Setting is another important key to the first chapter. The reader must have a sense of where the characters are.

During the writing process

Here are a few more things for you to consider when writing your book:

- Try not to quit writing while in the middle of a scene. This may stop the creative process.
- Before you start the next day, first read what you wrote the day before so you know how the story is flowing.
- Keep lists of minor characters you introduce so you can remember who's in there, how to spell their names, and any other pertinent information you used. Before I started doing this, I discovered myself taking a lot of time away from my writing by going back through a manuscript to see if I had mentioned the name of the florist, and if so, what his name was.
- Don't bring something out of thin air. If you need a horse, it must be there in the coral the whole time. That means the character would occasionally hear a whinny or see a little cloud of dust from where it had been prancing.
- Sometimes you can give characters nicknames. Remember to stay true to the character. In the movie, "Sleepless in Seattle" Annie asks Walter if he'd ever been called anything other than Walter. He replies that he had not. If he had been called Wally, his whole character would have changed, making him less rigid, ritualistic and predictable. Names of your characters are very important.
- Novels are written for entertainment value. If you have an agenda, the reader will pick up on it. This is not the correct forum for you to preach your beliefs or values. If the character has certain traits, ambitions or beliefs, they will show up in the story, but don't use the story to further your own personal causes.

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Editing your work

One thing is inevitable. After you've written your story, you will edit, edit, edit. How do you look for everything at the same time: grammar, story, sentence structure, etc.? The best way is to do several read-throughs.

The first re-read is for discovering if the story-line works. Check for steadiness and flow. Are there spots that make you stop reading in order to try to figure out what is being said? Also check for words that stick out and cause you to stop momentarily. You want your book to read smoothly with no interruptions.

Then you can edit for content. Are your characters believable? Do they talk one way in the first part of the book and another way in the last? Is your setting consistent? Do the scenes happen in chronological order?

Next, look at your sentence structure, word pictures, and dialogue.

Now edit grammar, punctuation and word usage.

Save spell check for last.

You as a writer

Set goals for yourself. Make them attainable, such as how many pages or chapters per day you will write, and stick to it.

Unplug the phone if you have to in order to limit interruptions.

Set aside time for writing every day. Try to make it the same time daily if possible. If you have a family, let them know this is *your* time. If you treat it like a job, the rest of the family will come to understand.

Can you fit all this into your life? Certainly! Here are some questions you can ask yourself that may help you find more time for writing.

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1. How many hours are you watching T.V. (non-research)?
2. Where is your time going?
3. Is there something you can delegate to other family members?
4. Is there something you can let go for the sake of getting some writing done each day?
5. How else can you free up more time?

Lastly, when working from home, hold yourself accountable for what you're doing. Lackadaisical or mediocre effort will yield second-rate work.

ASSIGNMENT #1, should you decide to accept it:

- If you haven't started writing your novel yet, begin by brainstorming some possible plots. When you find a story idea that piques your interest, then write out a brief outline of the sequence of events for the book. Don't worry if you think it isn't very good, the main plan is to get your creative juices flowing. Fill out character charts for your main characters. Begin your story notebook.
- If you have already begun writing your novel, but haven't finished yet, write out your plot, outline the sequence of events, and fill out character charts for your hero and heroine. Use these to begin your story notebook.

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