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Novel Advice:

Motivation for Struggling Writers, Creative Writing Tips for Aspiring Authors, and Lessons for Living a Writer’s Life

Kevin T. Johns

**Part 1 - Motivation**

**Introduction: Work like a Roofer**

I do most of my writing at the dining room table.

From where I sit, if I glance up above my laptop's screen, I can see through a window and across my backyard to the rear of my neighbor's home.

One day a couple of years ago, my neighbors were having their roof re-shingled. When I sat down at my computer to write at 9 am, half a dozen shirtless men in cargo pants and work boots, their bodies bronzed from the blazing sun, were already hard at work.

I put in three solid hours of writing that morning, and then called it a day. In the afternoon, I sat and drank beer in my backyard while one of my daughters dug in her sandbox and the other kicked a soccer ball across the lawn.

Up above us, the roofers continued to work.

When I made dinner that evening, I did so to the *rat-tat-tat* sound of shingles being nailed down.

As my family finished dinner a little past six p.m., the men atop my neighbor's home finally began to wrap-up their day's work. The roof was not yet complete, but they had made significant progress on their project. Much more progress than I had made on my novel that day.

The experience was an excellent lesson for me.

I realized that day just how lucky I was—how lucky *we* are—to be writers. We aren't risking our lives up on rooftops. We don't have to work ten hour days just to pay the bills, but that doesn't mean we should wrap things up after three hours, either.

Being a writer doesn't mean we get to be lazy.

Without ever saying a word to me, those roofer taught me that I could work harder on my writing.

What about you?

Are you ready to improve your craft? Are you ready to push through the resistance to do the writing you were born to do? Are you ready to work like a roofer, put in the hours, blood, sweat, and tears, so that you can live the writer's life?

If so, this book will help.

The collection of articles in this book is culled from material originally published on my website: http://www.kevintjohns.com. Almost every one of them was written in response to a question or challenge one of my writing clients came to me with.

You see, I'm a professional writing coach, which means I get to spend my days working with writers and aspiring authors, helping them to get ideas out of their heads, onto the page, and into readers' hands.

The challenges and questions my clients grapple with will be similar to those you face in your writing. The answers to those questions and the solutions to those challenges will be found within the pages of this book, and are organized in three sections.

Part 1 – Motivation. This is a collection of articles related to motivation, and the ability to press through roadblocks we all encounter when trying to write a novel. These articles will inspire you to keep on writing when the going gets tough.

Part 2 - Writing Tips. This section addresses common practicalities regarding the craft of creative writing, including my 12 Step Road for writing a novel.

Part 3 - The Writer's Life. This section explores other aspects of life as a writer, such as the importance of forging community.

Some of these articles are longer. Others are quite short. All of then will help you on your writing journey.

If you have any questions about the material contained in this book, or about any aspect of writing and publishing, please don't hesitate to contact me.

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**Don’t Be Afraid to Get Burned: High Art vs. Passionate Authenticity**

In late 2006, the rock band My Chemical Romance and director Samuel Bayer set out to record two music videos back-to-back. By the end of the shoot, drummer Bob Bryar had second-degree burns on his body, lead singer Gerard Way was hospitalized with torn muscles in his legs, and one of the greatest music videos in history had been created.

The first video shot that day was "Welcome to the Black Parade," the centerpiece of the band's new concept album, and a massive production. Drawing from the aesthetics of German expressionist cinema of the 1920s, the video tells the story of a man who dies from cancer and is escorted to the afterlife via a parade of death.

The pedigree that director Samuel Bayer brought to the production, having worked with the likes of Nirvana and Green Day, was undeniable, and costumes for the shoot were produced by Academy Award winning designer Colleen Atwood.

By all accounts, the resulting big budget high concept music video was a total success, with over 40 million YouTube views. Front-man Gerard Way described it as a perfect visual representation of The Black Parade album as a whole.

The second video of the shoot was for the song "Famous Last Words." The concept was simple, and meant to maximize the double-shoot's budget by re-purposing sets and costumes from the "Black Parade." Simply, the band would perform the song while surrounded by flames.

"Famous Last Words," in essence, is a performance video, with little more than the flames and costumes to augment the musicians. And yet the "Famous Last Words" video surpasses "Black Parade" on virtually all levels, and has now reached over 75 million views on Youtube.

The band begins the video already in a state of frenzied passion, and, throughout the course of the song, the energy and intensity continually grows until it seems as though total annihilation of the performers is inevitable. There are moments when the viewer witnesses the performers' shoulders heaving up and down as they gasp to bring the burning air into their lungs.

The passion of the lyrics and music, combined with the evident anger, desperation, exhaustion, and deterioration of the band over the course of the song merge to produce an utterly unforgettable and emotionally visceral viewing experience.

When I learned Way and Bayer were seriously injured while making the video, I was not the least bit surprised. The video screams danger at every turn. There is an authenticity to the performance, the lyrics, and the music, and it's that raw and passionate authenticity that makes "Famous Last Words" one of the greatest music videos ever made.

Too many writers strive to create the "Welcome to the Black Parade" video with the words. They want perfect prose. They want massive production value. They want award-winning collaborators and an aesthetic that demonstrates how smart they are by paying homage to well-respected niche high art productions of the past.

Fuck that.

I urge you to forget perfection.

Reject the past.

Give up on proving to everyone how clever you are.

What I want you to do is create your version of "Famous Last Words."

When I read your writing, I don't want high production value.

I want authenticity. I want passion and I want danger.

I want writers who are willing to get burned while creating their art.

The band members in My Chemical Romance were up for the challenge.

Are you?

**Do You Want it BADLY Enough?**

Many aspiring authors are paralyzed by fear of not being good enough.

They spend their time worrying their prose style just doesn't hack it, their story-telling chops are weak, they've chosen the wrong point of view, they should have gone with the other story idea, etc. etc. I've heard it all.

They're so worried they aren't good enough, that when faced with adversity in the form of beta reader feedback, critique group comments, or recommended editorial revisions, they crumble under the pressure. A suggestion to consider changes in their work seems to confirm their deepest, darkest fears of inadequacy.

Of course, sometimes the harshest criticism doesn't even come from real people. Instead, it's the imaginary voices inside their own heads telling them they are destined for failure.

The irony is that these writers do indeed have a major obstacle preventing them from success, but those obstacles are not what they spend all their time worrying about.

The problem isn't that they aren't good enough.

The real problem is they don't want it bad enough.

If you really want to be an author, if you want it so intensely you can feel it bubbling in your blood and embedded in the matrix of your bones, you'll be willing to fight with every fiber of your being to make it happen.

Bad reviews. Writers block. Criticism and rejection. You'll face all of it – we all do. But if you want it badly enough, you'll be able to overcome anything. When you're really hungry for success you won't let anything stand in your way.

Stop sitting around worrying about whether your writing is good enough or not. It doesn't matter. There are thousands of extraordinary writers out there with careers that have gone absolutely nowhere because they weren't willing to fight for their dreams. They weren't willing to put in the years of hard work and heartache required to build a career and find success.

Which means you need to be asking yourself, "How BADLY do I want it?"

That's what you should be worrying about.

Do you want it so badly that you persist through the guaranteed adversity you’ll face on the path to achieving your dreams? Are you willing to make the sacrifices necessary to get to the top?

No one is going to hand you anything in this life. You're going to have to fight for every inch of ground you get.

Stop worry that you aren't good enough!

Instead, start asking yourself if you want it badly enough.

**It’s Not Too Late to Become an Author**

A client of mine recently told me she thinks she might be too old to launch her writing career.

She's in her early 30's.

I assured her she was not too old.

And neither are you.

A career as an author isn't like professional sports, modeling, or becoming a pop star. You're chances of hitting it big don't decline with age. Rather, they improve, because long-form fiction writing is a skill-set that takes many years to develop and perfect. Much like the wisdom that informs great writing is gained through life experience. The more triumphs you experience and tragedies you endure, the better perspective you'll have as an author.

Hemingway's time spent as an expatriate, WWI ambulance driver, and Spanish Civil War combatant undoubtedly led to him writing masterpieces like The Sun Also Rises, A Farewell to Arms, and For Whom the Bell Tolls respectively.

Reaching middle age isn't a reason to give up on your dreams of becoming an author; it’s a reason to pursue them all the more vigorously.

As Malcom Gladwell points out in his New Yorker article "[Late Bloomers"](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/10/20/late-bloomers-2), which explores late blooming painters as well as authors, "The Cézannes of the world bloom late not as a result of some defect in character, or distraction, or lack of ambition, but because the kind of creativity that proceeds through trial and error necessarily takes a long time to come to fruition."

If you do publish later in life, you won't be alone:

* William S. Burroughs was 39 when his first book, Queer, was published.
* Henry Miller debuted with Tropic of Cancer at the age of 44.
* Charles Bukowski wrote Post Office and became a published novelist at 49 years old.
* Raymond Chandler's first book, The Big Sleep, came out when he was 51.
* Richard Adam's debut effort, Watership Down, was published at age 52.
* Frank McCourt was a 66 year old retiree when he wrote his first novel, Angela's Ashes.
* Norman McLean launched an author career at the ripe age of 74 with A River Runs Through It.

Age wasn't a factor for any of these authors, and it shouldn't be for you either.

In fact, the website, [Bloom](https://bloom-site.com/), is dedicated to "authors whose first books were published when they were 40 or older; who bloomed in their own good time."

When it comes to writing and publishing your first novel, it's never too late.

Take heed of the Chinese Proverb: "The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second best time is now."

**Billy Boyd and the Four Hundred and Thirty Takes**

On the special features disc from the third of Peter Jackson's Hobbit films, The Battle of the Five Armies, there is a featurette about the recording of the film's closing song, "The Last Goodbye," which was performed by actor and musician Billy Boyd (Pippin from the Lord of the Rings trilogy).

As identified in the featurette, Boyd recorded 430 takes of the song.

I repeat: four hundred and thirty takes!

Spend a moment thinking about the type of dedication that would require.

Do you have 430 takes in you?

More importantly, how many drafts of your last piece of writing did you write?

Was it two?

Maybe three?

I'm hoping it was more than that, but I'm willing to guess it was probably less.

(And I'm almost positive it wasn't 430 drafts.)

Creating memorable art takes work, dedication, and humility.

The next time you're busy telling yourself your first draft is perfect, take a second to think about Billy Boyd singing the same song 430 times in a row.

That's the type of dedication and perseverance it takes to create something that will live beyond you and touch people's souls.

**How to Crush the Haters**

Every single day of high school was a war zone.

I was a punk rock kid living in a small, country town populated by hicks and rednecks.

I was called "freak," "faggot," and "loser" more times than I could count.

I was spat on and beaten-up.

What I'm getting at is I'm no stranger to haters.

All my life, people have tried to beat me down.

As a writing coach, it's not all that different.

Every single time I run an advertisement for a webinar on Facebook or dare to promote my writing courses on Twitter, someone inevitably feels the need to leave a snarky comment about how training for writers isn't necessary, my webinars are a waste of time, and coaching for authors offers no value.

Time and time again, people feel the need to tell me that what I have to offer to the world isn't of value. These haters insist writing a book is simple (Ha!), and "all you have to do is sit down at a keyboard and write." (If only!)

Whenever one of these comments pops up, the first thing I do is take a look at the person's name, and then hop over to Amazon and do a search. Can you guess how many times the people who have written these comments have had published books available for purchase?

Never.

Not once.

I could get upset about these people. I could try to defend the value of what I do for a living. I could get into flame wars with them. But I resist the urge.

Instead, I keep doing the good work.

I keep writing books.

I keep putting all the knowledge I have into my webinars.

I keep doing everything I know possible to ensure my coaching clients feel supported, cared for, and confident that their writing matters.

Because that's how you crush the haters.

You crush them by doing the hard work, and the good work, again, and again, and again.

You beat them by refusing to let them stop you.

You win by continuing to write and publish your books.

The haters will never know how hard it is to write and publish a book because they'll never do it, even as they spend their time relentlessly telling anyone who will listen how easy it is.

Long after the haters have grown tired of trying to get attention with their bitter and cynical insults, you and I will still be producing art, doing our work, and changing people's lives.

The haters will forever stand on the sidelines of life while you and I are on the field, living it.

**Don’t Worry What their Bitter Hearts are Going to Say**

Imagine this...

After years of perfecting your craft and building an audience in the independent publishing world, you finally land the contract you've always dreamed of with one of the big five publishing houses. Then when your book is released, it flops, and the publisher releases you from your contract.

What now?

Do you pack it in?

Give up?

Get a real job?

This is what happened to the pop punk band Jimmy Eat World. After signing to Capital Records in the mid-90s, the band was dropped from the label in 1999 after selling only 10K copies of their two major label albums.

So what did Jimmy Eat World do? Did they accept the "fact" that their dreams would never be fulfilled? Did they give up, like so many of us would?

No.

They went back to work writing songs, and then they self-financed the recording of their next album, Bleed American. The album included the song, "The Middle", which features these lyrics:

Don't write yourself off yet

It's only in your head you feel left out or looked down on

Just do your best

Do everything you can

Don't you worry what their bitter hearts are going to say

It just takes some time

Little girl, you're in the middle of the ride

Everything, everything will be just fine

Everything, everything will be all right

 "The Middle" hit #1 on the rock charts before crossing over into the pop charts where it hit #5.

Bleed American sold a million copies and was certified platinum, producing three other singles in addition to "The Middle."

The next time you feel like giving up on your dream of becoming a published author, give a listen to Bleed American. There's a good chance you're in the middle of the ride.

**You Aren't a Genius**

So you aren't a genius.

You weren't born more talented or more intelligent than other writers out there.

Words don't flow from your pen magically.

You aren't a once-in-a-generation wunderkind.

Listen, that's okay.

You know what the geniuses do?

They (Virginia Wolf) kill (Ernest Hemingway) themselves (Hunter S. Thompson). Seriously (David Foster Wallce). Like (Kurt Cobain) all (John Kennedy Toole) the (Thomas Chatterton) freaking (Ian Curtis) time (Sylvia Plath).

You and I weren't born with the gifts those people were blessed/cursed with.

That's cool.

It's okay.

It just means we'll have to work harder than them.

And our success won't happen over night.

It will take years of perseverance and dedication.

And, in the end, we'll live to enjoy it in a way they couldn't.

We'll cherish our literary success the way one cherishes a delicious piece of warm pie.

We won't blow our heads off or walk into a creek with a pocket full of stones.

We'll struggle, and work, and sweat, and cry to create good art.

And, when it's all said and done, we'll still be around to see our grandkids grow up.

With all my heart, I promise you: there are better things than being born a genius writer.

**What’s Your “Voice of Fire”?**

I'm lucky to live in Ottawa, Ontario, home of Canada's National Art Gallery.

In 1989 the newly opened Art Gallery purchased a work by abstract painter Barnett Newman titled, ["Voice of Fire"](https://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=35828).

Originally created as a commission for Expo 67, a celebration of Canada's centennial, the painting is 18 feet long and consists of three equal-sized vertical stripes. The two outer stripes are blue, and the stripe down the middle is red.

In the spring of 1990, it was announced the painting had been purchased by the gallery for a price of $1.8 million.

I was 10 years old at the time of this announcement and to this day I still remember the resulting shit storm. The media proclaimed outrage that millions of dollars in Canadian taxpayer money had been used to purchase a painting.

Worse yet, it was a painting anyone could have created. After all, it was just three lines on a canvas! The public debate raged in newspapers and on local news shows, and the discourse soon turned to whether "Voice of Fire" could even be considered art.

(Now would be a good time to remember Demetri Martin's adage: "When someone describes themselves as a taxpayer, they're about to be an asshole.")

All around me -- on the radio, amongst my teachers at school, and in huddles of parents along the sidelines at soccer practice -- I heard the same thing repeated time and time again: "I could have painted that."

The logical response to this statement was just as obvious to my ten-year-old self as it is to my current 36-year-old self: "But you didn't."

Intent is worthless.

Ideas are dime a dozen.

The only thing that matters is execution.

It doesn't matter that the concept you have for a book is great. It doesn't matter that it would make wonderful series. It doesn't matter that you have all sorts of spin-off concepts ready to roll out. Most people with even a modicum of creativity have just as many good ideas as you do.

You need to execute on your ideas. You need to take those wonderful ideas and make them reality.

Anyone could have conceived of and painted "Voice of Fire," but only Barnett Newman did.

What's your "Voice of Fire"?

Stop thinking about it and go create it.

Execution is everything.

**Please Your Audience**

When Netflix launched the Full House revival, Fuller House, my wife, our three daughters, and I sat down to binge watch as many episodes as we could. We had an absolute blast.

The critics, however, did not enjoy the show nearly as much as my family did.

The critical consensus was that "after the initial dose of nostalgia, Fuller House has little to offer to anyone other than the original series' most die hard fans."

Oh, really, Mr. Critic?

You mean the streaming revival of a notoriously cheesy family sitcom a full thirty years after its debut isn't going to have mass appeal in the year 2016?

Well, no shit, Mr. Critic. Thanks for the amazing insight.

Here is the reality: the days of appealing to the masses are over.

The major label music industry is dead and buried.

Mainstream television is on its last legs.

Outside of the bizarre world of hundred-million-dollar Hollywood blockbusters, creating art that appeals to everyone is no longer the goal.

Breaking Bad is acknowledged as one of the greatest television shows of the last decade (if not all time). Did Breaking Bad appeal to everyone? Hell no. Yet the show was a massive success specifically because today's popular culture is all about micro-tribes.

In other words, finding success as a modern artist is about pleasing a micro-tribe—your fans. Despite what the critics may think, creating art that pleases your fans is not something to be criticized.

As a writer, your goal isn't to appeal to the masses, and it's certainly not to please the critics.

Your goal is to find an audience, build a fan base, and then please those fans.

Fuller House's critical rating on Rotten Tomatoes is 31% positive.

Its viewer rating (i.e. the people the show is actually for) is 81%.

When you face a similar response to your next project, which stat are you going to pay attention to?

**Don’t Make Your Book More Important Than It Is**

There's a major roadblock that stops many aspiring authors from finding success, and I see it time and time again with my coaching clients.

They take their book too seriously.

These aspiring authors believe that, once completed and published, their novel will define who they are; nay, that it will define their very value as a human being.

They believe the book will launch their professional author careers and transform their lives, bringing them wealth and fame.

Paradoxically, they also believe it will bring them ridicule, shame, and disdain, or that unless their book is perfect, it will never be appreciated by anyone.

They think it needs to be as good as INSERT YOUR CRITICALLY-BELOVED FAVOURITE-BOOK-EVER HERE.

These writers have so much of their hopes and dreams and hearts and souls invested in these beliefs that it becomes overwhelming. It causes blocks, insecurities, second guessing, and procrastination.

If this sounds like you, then I'm going to share a cold hard truth with you today.

Ready for it?

Here we go:

You're book isn't that big of a deal.

It's really not.

Over 300,000 books will be published this year. Yours will be one of them. Stop making it more important than it really is.

Your book will be a work of art you've created for the enjoyment or education of others, but it won't be you. It won't define you. Whether people love it or hate it (or the more likely option of all: are indifferent to it) will say absolutely nothing about your value as a human being.

Publishing a book will be the start of your life as an author, but publishing won't turn into an instant career. A sustainable career as an author means writing and publishing more books. Usually many more books.

Even if you're book is a huge hit, it almost certainly won't bring you wealth and fame. (If wealth and fame is what you're after, a career as an author is the wrong path to begin with.) Book publishing isn't a growth industry. Most people watch Netflix, not read books. The New York Times called Americanah the best novel of 2013. Did you read it? Didn't think so.

Oh, and guess what? You're book isn't going to be as good as INSERT YOUR CRITICALLY-BELOVED FAVOURITE-BOOK-EVER HERE. That author's next book wasn't as good as that one either, so why should yours be?

Stop taking yourself and your book so damn seriously.

Have some FUN writing!

If we can't have fun making art and telling stories, then what hope is there for joy in this world?

Your responsibility as an artist and writer is not to create the greatest novel ever written (because that doesn't even exist!).

Your job is to create.

Your job is to tell stories. Lots of them. They don't have to be perfect. They don't have to be the greatest thing ever. They just have to BE.

Don't stand in the way of your book existing by piling unrealistic expectations on yourself and your writing.

**Embrace the Dissidence Between Real and Imagined**

The dichotomy between plan and execution can be a difficult and frustrating concept to come to terms with. It's why so many people give up on artistic endeavors like writing a novel.

Part of the process of turning pro as an author or writer involves coming to terms with the fact the final version of the story/magazine article/blog post/novel that ends up on the page or screen is never as good as the version you had in your head.

I have spoken with many writers who successfully completed National Novel Writing Month (writing a 50K word manuscript in 30 days), but never published the book they wrote. The manuscript didn't turn out as perfect as they had hoped or intended, and rather than revising their first draft and improving on its weaknesses, they put the book in a drawer and gave up on it. They are unable to bridge the gap between the idea and the reality of their story.

As Ira Glass notes in his much quoted observation, "All of us who do creative work, we get into it because we have good taste. But there is this gap. For the first couple years you make stuff, it's just not that good. It's trying to be good, it has potential, but it's not. But your taste, the thing that got you into the game, is still killer. And your taste is why your work disappoints you." This sense of disappointment can be crippling, particularly if a writer has not prepared themselves for it.

Until you accept your own imperfections as a writer, you'll forever be chasing the 'perfect version' of your story, and thus forever disappointed by your creative output. When grappling with my own gap between taste and ability, I often return to the concept of "mimesis" as discussed by Plato and Aristotle.

For these ancient Greek thinkers, mimesis meant to copy or imitate. According to Plato, all things in the material world, including art, were a lesser copy of the perfect metaphysical version of that thing or concept. A chair here on earth, no matter how beautifully constructed, would never be as perfect as the true version of that chair in Heaven. The same went for poetry.

Aristotle argued, contrary to Plato, that "the arts have a certain healing power because they are imaginative, and that the healing catharsis of tragedy is generated only because they are imitative and detached from reality." ([New World Encyclopedia entry on "mimesis"](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Mimesis))

As such, rather than getting down on your art and labeling it as a poor imitation of what you intended to create, I urge you to embrace the dissidence between the real and the imagined. You are never going to achieve that perfect vision that exists in your mind, but, as Aristotle notes, there is value in imperfection.

Stop chasing metaphysical perfection.

Embrace the gap between taste and ability.

Put words to the page and then put your writing into the world.

**Part 2 - Writing Tips**

**It Depends**

There are a lot of "rules" when it comes to good writing.

As a writing coach, I get asked questions about these rules a lot.

"Should I cut my book's prologue?"

"Should I always avoid adverbs?"

"Should all my sentences be in active voice?"

"Should I never edit while drafting?"

The answer to all of these questions is . . . it depends.

The rules of good writing are there as guideposts. They are meant to keep you from going too far off track.

Is it a good idea to follow these rules?

A lot of the time it is, but a lot of the time it isn't.

Writing is an art form.

Rules are made to be broken.

Part of becoming a better writer is learning to trust your instinct.

Does your book really need a prologue? Don't look to the rules for your answers. Listen to your gut.

It's important to learn your craft and to respect your chosen art form, but it's equally important to learn to listen to your inner spirit – the creative voice that inspired you to put those words down on the page in the first place.

Learn the rules. Then learn to put faith in your decision to break them.

**The Novel Writer's Roadmap: 12 Steps to Writing Your Novel**

Writing a novel is not an easy task.

Having spoken with hundreds of writers from around the world, I've consistently had authors confess to me that they spent 8 years writing their first novel.

Let that sink in for a moment... 8... freakin'... YEARS!!

(You could get a Ph.D. in the same amount of time.)

Most of these writers are well-educated people – they have degrees in Journalism, Communications, or English Literature.

And those who don't have a formal education are passionate readers that have usually been writing and telling stories, in one form or another, for most their lives.

If that's the case, why does it take them nearly a decade to write their first novel?

The answer is surprisingly straightforward: **writers are never taught how to write a book.**

Most aspiring authors approach the drafting of their novels without the tools, resources, or even the most basic information necessary to work in an effective and efficient manner.

The image of the tortured artist struggling along year after year until one day they're finally hit with a stroke of genius is firmly engrained into our cultural milieu.

It's no wonder so many authors struggle to get their novels written; we're told again and again that it's supposed to be a painful, confusing, and energy draining effort.

But do you really think Stephen King is wracked with existential angst every time he puts words to the page?

Was writing the Harry Potter series a horrific struggle for J.K. Rowling?

Of course not.

Professional writers like Rowling and King have established systems, structures, and foundational skillsets that allow them to do what they do best: write joyfully.

This roadmap is meant to help move YOU towards joyful writing.

It will show you what you need to do, and the order in which you need to do it.

No mystery, no confusion, and no dark nights of the soul.

Just a simple program you can follow to complete your first novel (and every novel after that) quickly and efficiently.

**Step One: Adjust Your Mindset**

Successful writing has more to do with education than it does with inspiration. Get it out of your head that writing is a magical talent handed down onto a rare chosen few by the Muse. It's not. Writing is a craft. You need to acknowledge it as such and begin educating yourself about the art form (via books, courses, workshops, articles, podcasts, coaching, etc.). You'll work to continually improve your writing skills throughout the novel drafting process, and, if you are smart, throughout your entire career as an author.

**Step Two: Genre**

Before you have an idea for a plot, or the concept for a group of unforgettable characters that readers are going to fall in love with, you need to know what genre you're going to be writing. Virtually every decision you make during the writing (length, tone, the use of archetypes and tropes) and marketing of your novel (cover design, sales copy, target audience) will be predicated on the requirements of your chosen genre.

**Step Three: Structure**

Story structure is the underlining framework upon which all great stories are told. Not only will choosing a proven story structure (the Hollywood three-act structure, the Heroes Journey, etc.) improve your chances of writing a book readers will love, it will also make the plotting process of your novel infinitely easier.

**Step Four: Characters**

It is important to know who your novel is going to be about, but even more important to know what your characters want to achieve or attain within the story. Clearly identifying your protagonist’s objectives, the obstacles they will face, and how they'll overcome (or succumb) to those challenges will be the lifeblood of your novel.

**Step Five: Plotting**

With your character's goals and the narrative demands of your genre in mind, begin the plotting process by identifying where key plot points (or "beats") belong within your chosen story structure. With the major beats identified, start filling in the gaps and fitting together the puzzles pieces of your story. By the time you are done this process, you'll have an outline, or "beat sheet," containing all the major scenes in your novel.

**Step Six: Start Drafting**

**Step Seven: Support and Focus**

The drafting process itself can be a long, grueling, and lonely experience. Don't go it alone. Find an accountability buddy for weekly check-ups, join a writing group in your community, participate in online discussions via messages boards and Facebook groups, and/or hire a professional writing coach. Staying focused on a single project for the amount of time it takes to write a book is a major challenge, so make sure you benefit from the support a community can offer.

**Step Eight: Finish Your First Draft... and Celebrate!**

Finishing the first draft of a manuscript is a major accomplishment. Reward yourself! Go out for a nice dinner, buy yourself a present, or take your family on a short vacation. You've done something very few people are able to do, and you deserve to feel good about it!

**Step Nine: Revisions**

Revisions to your manuscript need to be completed in a series of sweeps that will result in multiple drafts of the book. Each sweep of the manuscript should focus on specific elements such as pacing, quality of prose, story logic, dialogue, etc. The fantastic thing about revisions is that every single time you work on the manuscript during this phase of the writing process your novel just gets better and better. Cool, eh?

**Step Ten: Beta Readers**

With at least 3 major drafts of the book completed via the revisions process (one for you, one for the readers, and one for the haters!), you may get the manuscript to a point where you are ready to share it with beta readers. These are the first folks who will read your novel and provide you with feedback. Choose your readers wisely and pay close attention to similar criticism or feedback you receive from multiple readers, and then revise (again!) accordingly.

**Step Eleven: Hire a professional Copy Editor**

This will likely be the most expensive part of the entire book production process, but it is well worth every penny. Copy editors are a dream come true for fiction authors: the singular focus of their job is to take your writing and make it even better. They are the coach in your corner of the boxing ring and the quality control team of You Incorporated. They bring a unique skill-set to the drafting and revisions process, as well as a well trained and a critical lens to your writing. Do NOT skip this step. Work with an editor to get your manuscript as polished as it can possibly get!

**Step Twelve: Choose a Path to Publication**

Now that you have completed your manuscript, you are going to need to make a decision on which path to publication works best for you: traditional publishing or self (indie) publishing. There are benefits and drawbacks to both traditional and self-publishing. Investigate both options, and make a decisions that works best for you and your goals. Be sure to base your decisions not only on emotional issues, but also practical business factors. Whichever path you choose, I wish you nothing but success!

**How Long Should a Novel Be?**

I've often written and spoken of how it took me eight years to craft my debut novel, [The Page Turners](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00H1A29RO/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B00H1A29RO&linkCode=as2&tag=thepagturtri-20&linkId=BOICTIHIRVTVWWOY). Eight years is far too long to spend writing a first book. Looking back, I cringe at the thought of what I could have created in the time I wasted drafting and redrafting that novel.

One of the many reasons it took me so long to write my first novel was because I, like many rookie authors, wanted my debut to be an epic story. I had twenty-five years' worth of life experiences, thoughts, emotions, and stories to draw from, and I was determined to cram all of them into a novel that would dazzle readers and immediately launch my literary career into the stratosphere of super stardom!

At one point, the manuscript for The Page Turners was 130,000 words, but the published version is a little over 55,000; hardly an epic.

But you know what? Stephen King's first novel wasn't The Stand. It was a tight-packed little masterpiece called Carrie.

Once I followed King's lead by focusing on intimacy and letting go of my aspirations of a sweeping and grand narrative, the project finally become manageable. After I spent so many years struggling with this beast of a story, I was suddenly dealing with a focused and fast-paced narrative that had a clear theme and a nice sense of rhythm and harmony.

Before long, finally publishing the book was no longer a distant pipe dream; it had actually become an attainable goal. In shortening the length of my novel, I made my life as a writer much easier.

**The Benefits of Short**

It's easier to redraft and review a shorter novel. It's easier to convince beta readers to give it a look, and you get their feedback much quicker. As an independent author, it's significantly cheaper to pay for copy editing of a shorter novel, and the production costs of printing the final book are also more affordable.

Across the board, virtually everything becomes easier and more do-able once you commit to shortening your novel.

A shorter book also forces an author to focus with laser-like accuracy on the story's most important elements: the plot and lead characters. Tangents, supporting characters, and non-relevant aspects of the narrative are kept to bare minimum because there simply isn't room for them in a short book.

Tell an enthusiastic young writer you need them to write a 2,000 word article, and there's a good chance they'll return with 4,000 words of mostly unusable material. On the other hand, tell them you need 500 words and not a single word more...and they might just come up with something great.

I'm quite fond of the Orson Wells quote, "The enemy of art is the absence of limitations," and I think it can be applied wonderfully to word count. Keep the book short, and you're much more likely to create good art. At the very least, you'll reduce the chances of creating bad art.

The only thing worse than a bad novel is a bad novel of epic length!

With all of this in mind, I tell my writing students to aim for a 55,000 word novel for their debut book. A total of 55,000 words is the perfect length for a rookie author. It's short and sweet, and it forces the writer to stick to the point, something new writers often struggle with. And, of course, as mentioned earlier, it makes the entire project more manageable.

**Is a 55,000 Word Manuscript Novel Length?**

In his article, ["Word Count: How Long Should a Book Be?"](http://www.how-to-write-a-book-now.com/word-count.html) Glen C Strathy turns to The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America's (SFFWA) criteria for the Nebula Awards to determine his word count criteria.

Here's how the SFFWA defines the stories they review for the award:

Short story – under 7,500 words

Novelette – 7,500 to 17,500 words

Novella – 17,500 to 40,000 words

Novel – anything over 40,000 words

National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo), an annual event that challenges writers to craft a novel within the month of November, identifies 50,000 words as the minimum target for their definition of a novel.

As such, by either the SFFWA or the NaNoWriMo's definition, a 55,000 word book is certainly novel length.

That said, if you would prefer to turn to general opinion and/or critical regard to determine the minimum length of a novel, consider The Great Gatsby. F. Scott Fitzgerald's masterpiece is only 55,000 words long, and it's considered by many – myself included – to be one of the greatest novels ever written.

In fact, a number of my favourite novels are around this length: The Outsiders by S.E. Hinton, Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury, The Turn of the Screw by Henry James, The Old Man and the Sea by Earnest Hemingway, Lord of the Flies by William Golding, The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger, To the Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf, The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka, Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad, The Picture of Dorian Grey by Oscar Wilde, Notes from Underground by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll, Slaughterhouse Five by Kurt Vonnegut, and The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy by Douglas Adams, to name but a few!

As this list clearly demonstrates, despite what many young authors mistakenly believe, more words is not always better. From Kafka to Carroll, some of the greatest prose writers ever chose to produce shorter novels.

**In Praise of Long**

Despite my recommendation aspiring authors focus their efforts on producing a shorter book as their initial publication, I would be remiss to ignore the variety of well-loved long novels out there.

In her Salon.com article, ["Why we love loooong novels"](http://www.salon.com/2013/11/14/why_we_love_loooong_novels/), Laura Miller provides a convincing argument in praise of the epic. She also references [the New York Times report](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/11/business/media/city-on-fire-a-debut-novel-fetches-nearly-2-million.html?_r=0) that author Garth Risk Hallberg received a $2 million advance for his 900 page debut, City on Fire – a clear indication a shorter debut novel is not always the best route to critical acclaim and financial riches!

Riffing on Miller's article, Maddie Crum's Huffington Post article, ["An Ode to Unaccelerated Reading"](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/16/long-novels_n_4597153.html) lists ten excellent novels well worth their page count. I'm sure we all have a beloved epic tome or two weighing down our bookshelves.

In fact, it was likely my love of Tokien's Lord of the Rings and Stephen's King's The Stand that got me into trouble with The Page Turners word count in the first place.

I'm not arguing that a novel must be short to be great; I'm simply suggesting that if you want to make the transition from aspiring author to published author in as smooth a manner as possible, you may want to save your epic for your sophomore release.

**Industry Standards by Genre**

Of course, only a few of the short novels I mentioned earlier were debut releases, and today's modern writers, especially those looking to break into the mainstream publishing industry, would be wise to take into account industry standards when it comes to determining world count for their work in progress.

In [a helpful article written for Writer's Digest](http://www.writersdigest.com/editor-blogs/guide-to-literary-agents/word-count-for-novels-and-childrens-books-the-definitive-post) in 2012, Chuck Sambuchino outlines recommended word counts for various different genres of books. His recommended word counts are as follows:

Commercial and literary novels for adults – 80K to 90K

Sci-fi and Fantasy – 100K to 115K

Young Adult – 55K to 70K

In another article on word count and book length, ["How Long is a Book? Determine Your Novel's Genre, Subgenre, and Best Word Count"](http://ezinearticles.com/?How-Long-is-a-Book?-Determine-Your-Novels-Genre,-Subgenre,-and-Best-Word-Count&id=2551535), Ronnie Smith expands on Sambuchino's list by adding some additional genres to the mix:

Romance – 80K to 100K

Mystery – 75K to 100K

Thriller – 90K to 100K

Western – 45K – 75K

These recommendations are extremely helpful to keep in mind while working on your book, particularly if you intend to secure an agent and a traditional publisher for your work.

Keep in mind, however, that Sambuchino and Smith's recommendations are based on the long-entrenched requirements of the traditional book publishing industry. As such, the recommended word counts are largely the result of industrial standards and therefore have more to do with the production requirements of paperback books than they do anything related to storytelling technique, artistic aspirations, or the preferences of readers.

**New Standards**

In recent years, the rise of ebooks, along with the ever-increasing ease with which independent authors can self-publish their work via web and print-on-demand has completely changed book industry standards in terms of word counts requirements.

With storytelling becoming increasingly digitalized, the very meaning of terms like "books" and "novels" are being consistently destabilized.

Ebooks come in a variety of forms and lengths, and print-on-demand can turn a project of any reasonable word count into a paperback publication. Authors are now free to craft books and novels with word counts that are bound only by the author's imagination and creativity, and the audience's receptivity.

Hugh Howey's hit self-published novel Wool was originally released as a series of e-novellas. Authors Johnny B. Truant and Sean Platt are releasing serial fiction that is then collected together into "seasons", thereby combining 19th century Charles Dickens-like publishing model with that of modern television. Erotic authors, riding the surging 50 Shades of Grey wave, are consistently finding new and innovative ways to get their work into reader's hands, including bundling books from several authors together to create what is, essentially, an anthology of novellas.

**Where to Go From Here?**

If it was difficult to determine exactly how long a novel should be in the past, it's only going to become increasingly more difficult in the future. As independent authors continue to push the boundaries and test what digital publishing and print-on-demand has to offer, and as the traditional publishing industry attempts to keep up with technological innovations reshaping the publishing landscape, there's no telling what a "book" might look like in the years to come.

If you're looking for a career in traditional publishing, educate yourself on the word counts the publishers and agents you're targeting are looking for. If you are embracing independent publishing, get creative! There's an exciting world of storytelling possibilities out there, and whether your book is a short jaunt or an epic journey, is totally up to you. Remain true to your vision, give your audience the read of a lifetime, and the last thing they'll be thinking about is word count.

**Scrivener Isn’t the Answer You’ve Been Looking For**

As a writing coach, it's a rare week that goes by without someone asking me whether or not they should purchase Scrivener.

Scrivener is a fantastic program for writers and novelists. The recent release of a mobile app version makes it an even more useful writing tool for authors on the go.

Portion of this book were written in Scrivener.

So, just to be clear, Scrivener is a top notch writing program.

But . . . it's not the magical solution to your writing woes that you've been looking for.

Neither is Write Way Pro or Final Draft.

Software will have zero impact on whether or not you write a great book.

There is no one tool or one technique for writing a masterpiece.

There is no secret answer for you to uncover or tool for you to purchase.

As Seth Godin [recently put it,](http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2016/08/conservation-and-concentration-of-effort.html) "There isn't a magic formula, the perfect combination of tools to use or to avoid. What matters more is the decision to matter."

Hemingway wrote his unforgettable novels and short stories while standing up at a typewriter.

Jack Kerouac typed On the Road as one long unbroken paragraph on a 120-foot scroll.

Virginia Woolf wrote To the Lighthouse with a pen and paper.

Shakespeare crafted his plays using a quill made from goose feathers dipped in an inkwell.

The Marquis De Sade wrote 120 Days of Sodom in tiny letters on a 12 meter roll of paper while imprisoned.

John Milton composed Paradise Lost by memory and then dictated it to friends.

Truman Capote wrote Breakfast at Tiffany's using a pencil while lying down on a couch or bed.

There is no right answer.

There's no secret technique.

Writing software isn't the solution.

Each of these master writers found a system that worked for them, given their unique circumstance, and put it to work.

You need to do the same.

**The Difference Between Scenes, Sequences, and Chapters**

Authors, editors, and writing coaches like me have a number of different terms we use to group together story moments and beats within a narrative. There are so many terms that writers and aspiring authors can sometimes get confused about the difference between concepts like "scenes," "sequences," and "chapters." By the end of this chapter, you'll understand not only the difference between these terms, but also how they work together to create a cohesive and engaging narrative within your book.

Let’s start with the all-important story unit known as the scene.

**Scene**

A scene is one continuous piece of action within a linear time-frame and generally contained to a single location. A leap forward in narrative time, or a change in setting/location, usually marks the end of one scene and the beginning of a new one. We call this a scene-break.

When a scene-break happens within a chapter, it is usually identified by three centered asterisks or a double spaced brake between paragraphs. These techniques are meant to serve as a subtle visual signal to the reader that the scene they were reading has ended and when the story picks up again it will be taking place elsewhere or later that day.

Shawn Coyne (The Story Grid: What Good Editors Know) and Robert McKee (Story: Style, Structure, and the Principles of Screenwriting) are both in agreement that an effective scene must contain a polarity shift, i.e. things need to go from good to bad, or from bad to good. If there isn't a major shift in polarity, nothing has really happened in your scene, which means it's time to go back to the drawing board.

Now that we have clarity around a scene, let's turn our attention to the term sequence.

**Sequence**

A sequence is a collection of scenes that are connected or related in some significant manner, either dramatically, narratively, or thematically. A novel will be made up of many sequences, just like a sequence is made up of several scenes.

The triptych approach to developing a sequence, for example, includes a scene that is primarily set-up, followed by a scene that contains the main action or conflict, and then a scene that focuses on the response to that action or conflict. These three scenes work together to form a short sequence.

A sequence does not, however, have to be limited to just three scenes. A date sequence in a romance novel might include several scenes, such as:

1. Getting dressed for the date.
2. The dinner portion of the date.
3. A walk in the park after dinner.
4. The kiss good night on the apartment steps.

These four scenes (note that each takes place in a different location and time) work together to form our date sequence.

While each scene should contain a turning point where the polarity shifts, McKee suggests sequences should also contain a larger polarity shift. In this date sequence example, perhaps our character began the sequence feeling pessimistic about the date, and by the end of the sequence found themselves falling in love. The four scenes thus work together to create this larger polarity shift over the course of the sequence.

While what makes up a scene is fairly specific (continual time and space), a sequence is a little more vague in that the connections between these scenes aren't as explicit.

**Chapter**

Chapter breaks can happen at any time.

A chapter is a tool authors use to force their readers to take a breath, ensuring a momentary pause in the narrative. This is accomplished by forcing the reader to make the deliberate action of turning the page.

In book production, the spread of two pages within a book is identified as consisting of the recto page (right hand page) and the verso page (left hand side). As per book publishing conventions, a new chapter always begins on the recto page. This means when a chapter ends, the reader must take a break by either turning the recto page over and skipping the blank verso on its back, or, if the chapter ends on the verso, by having some blank space at the bottom of the reading page, and usually at the top of the new chapter page.

A chapter break, then, is a dramatic tool you as a writer can keep in your storytelling arsenal.

If you are so inclined, you can break up a single scene with a chapter: you can have two characters talking in a single location, end the chapter at a dramatic point in the conversation, and then pick up the conversation at exit same moment immediately at the beginning of the next chapter. The single scene is continued across two chapters, with the chapter break serving as a dramatic pause.

When it comes to chapter length, there is no right answer. Shawn Coyne recommends 2000 word chapters, which he describes as ["potato chip length".](http://www.storygrid.com/414/) But whether to go short, medium, or long length with your chapters depends on your preference as an author and on the demands of the story you are telling.

Some authors prefer longer chapters containing multiple scenes and sequences, while others prefer each chapter to contain just a single scene.

J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince and Dan Brown's The Da Vinci Code are comparable in length at around 150K words long each, but The Half-Blood Prince contains only 30 chapters, while The Da Vinci Code contains 106 chapters.

Why the difference?

Longer chapters often feel more immersive to the reader. This can be great for fantasy (like Half-Blood Prince) or science fiction stories where an author needs to draw the reader in to a new and fantastic world. Shorter chapters, on the other hand, give a faster-paced feel to the story and are great for creating cliff-hangers at the end of chapters. This can be especially effective for thrillers (like Da Vinci Code) and action stories.

In the past, chapters tended to be longer. These days, modern authors tend to err on the shorter end of length. Ultimately, chapter length is a stylistic and dramatic decision you'll need to make for yourself.

Regardless of whether you chose to go with longer or shorter chapters, you'll want to ensure a certain measure of consistency in chapter-length throughout your book. If you have five chapters all 1000 words in length, and then suddenly drop an 8000 word chapter on the reader, it'll likely be jarring and impact the flow of the reading experience in a negative manner.

For some other examples of how chapters can be used for stylistic purposes, look to Irvin Welsh's Trainspotting, where chapter breaks serve as an opportunity to change narrators, each of whom have a vastly difference point of view and voice, or to Twilight: Breaking Dawn, where a series of chapters with no words at all serves to emphasis the protagonist's prolonged feeling of emptiness and the passing time.

**Our Three Terms Revisited**

To revisit our three terms:

Scenes are a continuous piece of action contained to a set time and location.

Several scenes with a connected narrative thread work together to form a sequence.

Chapters are a stylistic tool authors use primarily to create a momentary dramatic break in the narrative.

**How to Get the Reader Feedback You Really Want**

When seeking feedback on your manuscript, it's important to be honest with yourself regarding exactly what type of feedback you want.

Whether you're providing the piece of writing to a spouse, a critique group, or beta readers, you'll need to let the reader know specifically what you require from them.

The worst possible thing you can say is, "Just let me know what you think."

When you leave your request wide open and vague, the resulting feedback could be regarding typos, the giant plot hole in act three, or something else entirely; all of which may or may not be helpful to you as the author.

The exact type of feedback you should be asking for will depend largely on what stage you are at in the drafting process.

When seeking advice from beta readers, for example, you'll likely be sharing a completed manuscript, in which case you'll probably be looking for comments on things like character arcs or overall pacing.

Whereas, the feedback you're going to want from a critique group that you've just read the 1st draft of a single chapter to will be very different, and will likely be focused on things like tone, word choice, and writing style.

Before requesting feedback from any reader, I recommend reviewing Jami Gold's helpful [beta reader worksheet](http://jamigold.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Beta-reading-worksheet-A-and-B.jpg), and then using the questions relevant only to the stage you are at in the crafting of your work.

All of that said, it's time to address the elephant in the room . . .

It's time to get real for minute, okay?

This is going to be just between us writers.

Whether you want to admit it or not, the truth is that most of what I've discussed here isn't actually relevant to you.

Right?

The feedback you want isn't related to pacing, typos, or characterization, is it?

Nope. Didn't think so.

You want readers to tell you, "It's good."

And that's it.

You might say you want a plot critique or feedback on characterization.

You may claim you want help identifying plot holes or polishing up the sentence structure.

But in your heart of hearts, what you really want is for the reader to tell you your story/chapter/manuscript is good. You are looking for positive feedback that will give you the motivation to keep writing, keep revising, and keep editing.

You want the positive energy that'll allow you to keep going.

There's nothing wrong with that . . . so long as you are being honest with yourself.

I often give the first draft of my books to my wife with the following instructions, "Please read this and then tell me that it's good."

She does.

And the resulting endorphin rush allows me to get back to work on the second draft.

It's part of my writing process, and it works great because I'm being honest about what I need from my reader in terms of feedback. I urge you to approach your reader feedback requests with the same honesty.

If you actually want them to "rip it apart" and find "every plot-hole and typo," tell them that.

But if what you are actually looking for simply for them to tell you, "It's good," then let them know that; you'll both be happier for it.

**The Toolbox Method for First-Time Authors**

A couple of years ago my wife gave me an awesome toolbox as a birthday present.

It has a sturdy handle and is filled with all kinds of tools: electric drills, adjustable wrenches, hammers, nails, and screws galore. It's always exciting to dig down inside and pull out the exact tool I need when confronted with a home fix-it project.

I love that toolbox, but most of the time it sits in my storage room, unused and untouched. I only pull it out when a new cabinet needs construction, a screw in a door handle needs tightening, or a kitchen drawer requires fixing. When those jobs arise, the toolbox is invaluable. The rest of the time, I put it away and forget about it.

For authors, the tools in our toolbox are the essential elements of writer's craft. Grammar, story structure, genre conventions, tenses, point of view, character arcs, and literary styles are the hammers and wrenches we use to fix our story when we run into a problem.

For many of the aspiring authors I work with, writer's craft can be extremely intimidating. When presented with the complexity of storytelling craft, many succumb to analysis paralysis. Ignoring writer's craft is a sure-fire road to ruin, but too much educational information can be overwhelming and even discouraging. So what's a first-time author to do?

My advice is to use the toolbox method.

Seek out educational resources. Learn the rules of storytelling. Respect the foundational tools of the trade. Read the books, take the courses, and commit to seek out knowledge about your chosen craft. Do all of the story and character planning work necessary to set yourself up for success.

Then, when it comes time to work on the first draft of your manuscript, take those tools, put them in the tool box, and put the tool box away in the storage room.

The first draft is about one thing; call it what you will, "[a shitty first draft](http://amzn.to/2a8wRM4)" or "[covering the canvass](http://amzn.to/29ZZc7N)," the point is getting the damn story out of your head and onto the page, grammar be damned! The rules of craft are there to help you tell your story in an effective manner, not to get in your way.

When the story is flowing, ride that wave as long as you can, baby!

But when you run into troubles with your story, when you find yourself faced with a story problem that's blocking you or preventing your story from being as effective as you intended, that is when it's time to pull out the toolbox and put your writer's craft tools to work. Is the pacing of your story not working? Are you not sure what your character should do next? Does it feel like the stakes haven't properly escalated? Go to the toolbox and pull out your writing craft tool that is right for the problem.

Continually improving as a writer means continually educating yourself, but it also means continually putting words on the page. Don't let your education as a writer overwhelm you. Put that knowledge aside when you need to, and then pull it out when the time is right.

**8 Simple Ways to Beef Up a Lean Manuscript (Without Adding Filler or Fluff)**

You've completed the first draft of your novel and it has come in at around 50K words.

But you were shooting for 80K.

Now what?

How do you beef up a lean manuscript? Where do you find 30,000 more words without just adding filler or fluff?

Despair not, my friend!

Here are eight simple methods for fleshing out your manuscript in a way that'll not only add words, but create a more rich, engaging, and textured novel.

**1. Show, Don't Tell**

Rookie authors often hear the maxim "show don't tell."

This is not because showing is inherently better than telling in all situations. Rather, the maxim is so often repeated because beginner writers have a tendency to favor telling over showing, resulting in a story with a pace that moves too quickly and a manuscript that is short on words.

Creating suspense, tension, and drama usually involves slooooooowing things down, stretching out a moment, and letting the reader sweat. How a writer slows down a scene is by showing instead of telling, i.e. going into more detail, which in turn means more words.

If your story is coming in short on word count, it probably means you're doing too much telling and not enough showing. Find the moments in your story that need to be slowed down, and then get in there and add details.

Don't just tell us the character crossed the busy street in the rain. Show us the raindrops hitting their skin, and how they dodged a yellow taxi splashing water up from the puddles in the dirty gutter.

**2. Add Sub-Plots**

The journey your protagonist goes on, the challenges they face, and the obstacles they overcome should be the focus of your narrative, but it shouldn't be the only story arc in your novel.

B and C plots (i.e. sub-plots) allow an author to explore characters, themes, and story events that function in relation to, alongside, or in-opposition to the main plot.

The A plot of the film The Empire Strikes Back is Luke Skywalker's journey towards becoming a fully trained Jedi, but what really makes Empire an extraordinary film is the B plot, the incredible love story playing out between Han Solo and Princess Leia.

Look for opportunities to add sub-plots to your book and to tie them into the main plot when possible.

**3. Create Establishing Shots**

In cinema and television, most scenes begin with an establishing shot. This is usually an exterior shot of the building, house, or spaceship within which the action of the subsequent scene happens. The purpose of these establishing shots is to give the viewer a sense of place, location, and geography.

Authors need to make sure they do the same work in establishing location and setting as filmmakers do.

Look for scenes in your manuscript that seem to be playing out in a nebulous void, and then do the work to establish a unique environment. Let the reader know about the setting the story or scene is taking place in.

There's a reason fantasy novels are usually long: their authors spend many words creating new and fantastic worlds. But your story doesn't need to be set in an alternate reality to be gripping and rich. Readers can be just as easily enthralled by a delicately described bedroom, or the contents of a litter-strewn alley.

**4. Improve Opening Hooks and Closing Cliff-hangers**

The opening paragraph of every single chapter in your book should draw in, excite, and titillate the reader. You want to give the reader a reason to continue reading the rest of chapter.

You'll also want most chapters to end on a dramatic note of some kind, if not an all-out cliff-hanger.

There's a good chance the opening and closing of chapters, as written in your first draft, aren't as gripping as they could be. Examine how each of your chapters opens and closes, and look for opportunities to amp up the drama, pull the reader in, and keep them turning pages.

**5. Use All Five Senses**

Authors often fall back on visuals as their default descriptive device. Characters are constantly looking, peering, glancing, and staring at things.

But sight is only one of the five senses.

Deepen your reader’s experience inside the story (and add words to your manuscript) by exploring the other four senses. What does your character hear? How does the food they are eating taste? What does the bed they are lying in feel like? How does the sewer they are exploring smell?

These additional descriptions will add variety to your prose, words to your manuscript, and details to your story.

**6. Add Second Level Action**

Your lean manuscript is likely filled with dialogue scenes, and there's nothing wrong with that; readers love dialogue! But if your manuscript is lacking words, it's an excellent opportunity to add a second layer of action to scenes.

Does your manuscript have your protagonist and the man she's falling in love with engaging in a conversation in a coffee shop or restaurant? Why not move the date to a mountain bike trail and have the conversation play out while the couple dodges rocks and fallen trees while hurtling down a mountain side on barely-controlled bicycles?

The opposite can also work. Does your manuscript feature a pure action sequence? If so, revise the scene and have a character confess a deep held secret or reveal a key plot point while grappling with the external action already taking place in the scene.

This second level of action will add layers to your scenes and words to your manuscript.

**7. Attach Objects to Characters**

The ring Frodo carries to Mordor; Katniss Everdeen's bow and arrows; Jay Gatsby's yellow car; Captain America's shield, Harry Potter's Nimbus 2000 – iconic characters are often defined not just by their unique personalities or the specific actions they take during the narrative, but also by the objects writers associate with them.

In my young adult horror novel, [The Page Turners](http://amzn.to/1TH5qvl" \t "_blank), I gave my character, Spenser, a gold watch. The watch symbolized his deteriorating relationship with his absentee father, but it also gave Spenser something to fiddle with when he was nervous. He touched when he was thinking about his dad, and he also used as a timepiece when I wanted to emphasize a ticking clock running out of time for my characters.

What objects can you attach to the characters in your manuscript to help define who they are, what their journey is about, and, as an added bonus, bump up that word count?

I often approach this technique by asking myself, when the action figure is made for my character, what accessories will he or she come with?

**8. Make Things Much Worse for Your Hero**

Brain Michael Bendis, writer of the comic book Daredevil, once said, "It's my job to make Matt Murdoch's life as horrible as possible."

Bendis said this because he understands that drama is about conflict. Characters must overcome challenges in a story, and the more difficult the challenges, the more dramatic their ultimate victory or transformation at the end of the tale.

Take a look at your lean manuscript. Have your characters really been pushed to their furthest limits? Have you made things as horrible for them as you possibly can? Probably not.

Want to add words to your manuscript while upping the drama and the stakes of your story? Identify the things that matter the most to your protagonist, the things that are dearest to her heart, and then take all of them away from her.

A lean manuscript probably means your protagonist isn't suffering nearly enough.

Get in there and really put 'em through hell. It's your job to make your characters’ lives as horrible as possible!

**How to Get Featured by Your Alma Mater**

In 2016, I was featured in the article, "[Student Storytellers: Creative Writing and the English Department at Carleton University,"](https://carleton.ca/english/2016/student-storytellers/) alongside other Carleton University alumni who launched author careers after graduation.

As an author, getting featured by your alma mater can be a great marketing boost for your books and your author career. Universities have a level of authority and credibility that other avenues, like blog interviews or podcast appearances, can't necessarily replicate.

Here's how to go about getting featured by your alma mater.

**Do Something Worth Writing About** – If you're an English grad who hasn't published a book, you probably aren't going to be featured by your English Department. If you're a journalism student who now works in IT, your J School probably isn't going to be interested in writing about your work. Do your school proud by taking what you learned and making something of yourself after graduation. As Benjamin Franklin put it, "Either write something worth reading, or do something worth writing."

**Maintain Relationships** – Following graduation, I've remained in contact with many of my former professors. These mentors challenged me, educated me, and supported me in a way I'll be forever grateful for, so it was important to me to make the effort to touch base with them from time to time in the years following graduation. With Facebook and other social media tools, there's no excuse not to remain in contact with people who have touched your life in a positive manner, and that includes incredible teachers and educators.

**Return to Campus and Help Promote the School Whenever Possible** – I've returned to campus on a number of occasions. I've given talks to potential graduate students about my experiences at Carleton. When I published [The Page Turners](https://www.amazon.com/Page-Turners-Blood-Trilogy-Book-ebook/dp/B00H1A29RO/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1466695395&sr=8-2&keywords=the+page+turners), I provided a copy to the English department to include alongside the work of other graduates in a display case. When the English Department put together some new webpages featuring successful alumni, [I gladly agreed to be included](https://carleton.ca/english/people/kevin-t-johns/). When I hosted the first live workshop for writers, I chose to do so on-campus. The best years of my life were spent at Carleton University, so I'm always looking for a reason to get back, and to give back to the school.

**Respond Promptly and Professionally** – When the school contacted me about being featured in the article, I provided the information requested in a prompt manner and I had professional quality photos ready for use in the article. If a journalist of any kind is interested in helping to promote your career and your work, you should be ready to do everything possible to make their lives easier.

The benefits gained from a university education don't just stop when you're handed a diploma. Use the simple steps outlined here to continue to leverage your university experience to support your author career.

**Why Writers Need to be Tightrope Walkers**

I've never been a fan of balance.

When I gave up on the government-recommended "balanced diet" and instead ate an unbalanced diet that consisted primarily of vegetables and meat, I lost weight, gained muscle, felt healthier, and athletically performed at a higher level.

That's just one example of why I've always believed obsessive focus and dedication is the secret to success, not the much touted "balanced approach."

I've learned the hard way, however, that obsessive focus can have its drawbacks, namely burnout. The more I teach writing, the more I find myself urging authors to find balance in their work and their lives.

If you are going to be a writer for the long term and avoid burning out, here are some of the things you're going to need to balance:

The established elements of strong story structure vs. The unique story you want to tell.

The importance of learning your craft vs. Fully embracing your creative spirit

Taking your work seriously vs. Having fun as an artist

Working hard on your writing vs. Spending time with your family

Committing yourself to long hours of in front of a computer vs. Getting exercise and healthy movement into your life

Plain language vs. Stylistic flourishes

Your day job vs. Your creative work as a writer

Dialogue scenes vs. Narrative prose

Group scenes vs. Intimate scenes

Big set pieces vs. Personal character arcs

Following your unique vision vs. Writing to market

The list goes on and on...

As it turns out, becoming a writer is a lot like taking on a career as a tight-rope walker.

Finding balance isn't just recommended, it's essential to your survival and success.

**Part 3 - Writer's Life**

**How to Forge Community, Make Connections, and Write Your Masterpiece**

Sweat clung to my clammy brow. My heart pounded at my ribs like hail on a tin roof. I placed my fingers against the keyboard of my laptop, but my hands didn't seem to possess the strength to type.

I was about to begin writing my first novel, and I was terrified.

I hadn't yet drafted a single word, yet already I wanted to quit, throw in the towel, pretend it never happened. Every inch of my body was telling me to close the computer, grab a snack from the kitchen, and sit my butt down in front of the television for some mind-numbing TV time.

But I couldn't quit.

In the three other rooms of that small apartment sat other writers struggling with the same fears and doubts as me. If I gave up, they would know; it would be a public failure.

So rather than give in to fear, I began to type.

Eight years later, the novel I began drafting in that moment was published.

The other writers in the apartment that day were my wife, my English Literature Master's thesis adviser, and his wife. The four of us had committed to lock ourselves inside the apartment together over the course of a long weekend and write fiction.

We drafted during the day, then read each other our work and shared novel advice over a communal dinner in the evenings. It was an exciting and invigorating experience, and it launched my career as a novelist.

But what we undertook that weekend was nothing new.

**The Myth of the Solitary Writer**

People love to perpetuate the fantasy image of the writer as a loner and outsider; the guy sitting there at two in the morning, cigarette dangling from his mouth and a glass of whiskey at hand, desperately typing away on an old typewriter.

In reality, this writer archetype rarely proves accurate.

Masterful writers aren't loners. They are networkers, connectors, and influencers. Great writing, like any worthwhile project, is a collaborative effort, and successful writers feed off the support and idea exchanges that come from strong relationships and networks.

That's why it is absolutely essential you get out there and connect with folks if you want a successful career in writing.

**Literary Movements are the Result of Creative Relationships**

The idea of the loner artist originates in the Romantic age with poets like William Wordsworth and Lord Byron. Yet despite what we think today, neither of these men were loners.

Wordsworth worked closely with Samuel Coleridge, and their friendly competition inspired both to greater and greater work. Lord Byron was intimate friends with the poet Percy Shelley and his wife, Mary Shelley.

In fact, Shelley's masterpiece, Frankenstein, originated when the three writers decided to try their hand at each crafting their take on a ghost story.

The productive and collaborative relationships amongst artists was not isolated to the Romantic age. Modernists like Virginia Woolf reached out to other English writers such as E.M Forrester early in her career, while Gertrude Stein brought together expatriates like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ezra Pound in her famous Paris salons.

C. S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien shared ideas about fantasy fiction as co-members of The Inklings, a literary discussion group at Oxford University, while Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs broke new literary ground together as the Beat Generation.

Writing is a solitary act, but none of the great writers covered here wrote, published, or marketed their fiction in isolation. They reached out, shared ideas, and furthered their literary careers by making strong connections with other writers.

**The Power of a Simple Letter**

In 2016, Chuck Palahniuk published a sequel to his cult masterpiece Fight Club. Rather than publish the story as a follow-up novel, Fight Club 2 was produced as a comic book series.

When it came time to decide who to collaborate with on the covers for the series, Palahniuk chose artist and writer David Mack.

In 1999, after seeing the Fight Club film, Mack contacted Palahniuk by way of a good ol' fashioned paper and pen letter. This letter incited a relationship through written correspondence between the two, which eventually burgeoned into a long-term friendship.

Fifteen years after that initial letter, Mack collaborated with Palahniuk on the sequel to his most famous and successful book.

You can do the same thing.

Seek out the artists that inspire you and write to them. Today, he or she may be your literary hero, but fifteen years from now you could be collaborating with them on an exciting project.

All it takes is a letter.

**How to Make Connections and Forge YOUR Literary Movement**

The internet provides myriad ways to connect with influencers, as well as other writers with whom you can learn and grow your craft. Here are just a handful of methods:

**Social Media** – A quick Twitter search for [#amwriting](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23amwriting&src=typd) or [#amediting](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23amediting&src=typd) will reveal thousands of writers for you to connect with. Facebook pages and groups allow you to keep track of your favorite authors while connecting with writers who are also fans of similar work. You can [start a board](http://www.pinterest.com/kevinjohns52831/writing/) and pin your favourite book covers or author quotes in Pinterest, then watch who follows, or join [writing and publishing focused](http://www.linkedin.com/groups?mostRecent=&gid=3761967&trk=my_groups-tile-flipgrp) groups on LinkedIn.

**Forums** – Discussion boards like [Absolute Write Water Cooler](http://www.absolutewrite.com/forums/) provide the perfect opportunity to ask questions, help out other authors, and build relationships.

**Blogs** – There is no shortage of wonderful blogs for writers. (The material contained in this book orginated on my blog.) Subscribe to your favorites, leave comments, or email the bloggers directly. Better yet, forge community by creating your own blog.

**Get Out There**

Nothing compares to real world interactions, and there are plenty of opportunities for a writer to get out there, shake hands, and make friends.

* [**Meetup.com**](http://www.meetup.com/) lists writer meet-ups and critique groups in virtually every major city in North America.
* **Local author readings** hosted by libraries and small press publishers can be an excellent place to network with influencers in your local community.
* **Conferences** can provide unparalleled access to agents and publishers; some even include pitch sessions where you can try to convince an agent to represent you there on the spot.
* **Online Summits** for authors are becoming increasingly common and are a great opportunity to connect virtually with other writers as well as influencers.

**Make it a Habit**

No one can do the writing for you, but the impact that a strong and motivating network can have on your career must not be underestimated.

I recommend you review the above methods, put together a weekly practice, and then hold yourself accountable. Your weekly plan could look something like this:

This week I will:  
– Email a favourite blogger  
– Post five blog comments  
– Share my expertise by answering three forum questions  
– Be an active participant in my local critique group

Place a check mark next to each task once they have been accomplished, and treat them with the same importance you do your weekly or daily word-count goals.

**The Path to Crafting Your Masterpiece**

How might Lord of the Rings and the Narnia books have differed had Lewis and Tolkien remained at home typing and not taken the time to meet and discuss literature with other intellectuals?

Would they have reached the same heights of imagination and craft? Perhaps not.

What heights might your work be taken to by making a new connection?

There is only one way to find out: start forging meaningful and productive relationships today.

**Life Will Always Get in the Way**

Things rarely go according to plan.

When working with my clients, this topic is something we return to often in our discussions regarding creating and stick to a regular writing habit. The idea that there is going to be a "perfect month" or even a "perfect week" where everything goes exactly according to plan is unrealistic. It just never happens like that. Life always gets in the way . . . but that's okay.

You're going to get sick. Your car is going to break down. A relative is going to come to visit. Things are going to get crazy busy at your day job. As a writer who is setting goals and working to achieve them, you're going to have to learn to roll with the punches life throws at and around you.

If you're struggling with illness, put writing on hold until you feel well. Adding the stress of writing on top of the pressure of illness isn't going to help make you healthier, nor will it move you any closer to achieving your writing goals. Focus on getting well, and then return to your writing once you're healthy again. There will be some catch-up to do, but that's just life.

It would be wonderful if we could all simply write 1700 words every day, but that's rarely the case. Life is a roller-coaster ride and the track before us is almost impossible to predict.

You're going to miss planned writing days. At times, things will go off-course. Unexpected distractions are going to arise. We all have healthy periods, as well as periods of illness.

Rather than get stressed out or become discouraged by unexpected challenges, try to anticipate delays and distractions on the road ahead, deal with them when they arise, and then get back on track towards pursuing your goals.

**How to Turn Any E-book into an Audiobook**

I'm a huge fan of audiobooks.

I spend two hours a day commuting to and from my day job, and audiobooks allow me to turn that otherwise wasted transit time into productive reading time.

I try to cycle through a fiction book, a book on business, and a book on writer's craft.

Unfortunately, not every book has an audio edition. Audiobooks can also be fairly expensive compared to their ebook counterparts. But despair not, my fellow audiophiles!

I've discovered a way to turn any ebook into an audiobook, and all you need is an iPhone.

You see, iPhones come with an accessibility feature for the visually impaired. Once this feature is switched on, your phone will read to you whatever content is on the screen, including an ebook!

Here's how to turn the feature on:

Settings -> General -> Accessibility

In the Accessibility menu, switch the VoiceOver toggle to "On."

Warning: Once VoiceOver is turned on, things will get a little wonky. Your traditional touch commands change, and it takes a little while to get used to the new commands. For example, in order to select an app you need to tap the app once, like you normally would, but you then need to double tap the app to get it to open.

If it's a Kindle ebook you want to turn into an audiobook, after turning the VoiceOver feature on, you'll hit the home button. You'll then single tap to select the Kindle app, and then double tap to open it.

Once you have your ebook open, swipe downwards on the screen with two fingers to initiate the reading. The Voice Over should begin reading the page on which your ebook is open.

Ta-da! You've just turned an ebook into an audio book.

**Bonus Tip for Authors:** Consider using the VoiceOver feature to review drafts of your manuscript. Typos and other problems become much more apparent when listening to your writing.

**Why I Self-Publish**

In 2016, I decided to self-publish my novel, M School.

It was my sixth self-published book. You might think the decision to go indie yet again was an easy one.

It wasn't.

I seriously considered seeking an agent and publisher for the novel.

Having gone the self-published route in the past, I was going in with eyes wide open. I knew exactly how much work was involved and what the results of that work would be. The idea of getting some help with the (sometimes overwhelming) workload of publishing a book was certainly appealing.

The possibility of getting an advance against royalties upfront (money coming in) instead of investing in editing and design myself (money going out) was also a nice thought.

And, of course, there's some serious prestige that comes along with securing a book contract.

As a writing coach, the most appealing aspect of all for going traditional was that having gone through the process of traditional publishing myself I would have (arguably) been in a better position to coach clients through that process.

Like I said, it wasn't an easy decision, but in the end, I decided to go indie.

Here's why.

**I Know What I'm Doing**

This ain't my first rodeo. I know how to choose a cover designer. I know how to work with an editor. I know how to publish and market a book. While help with the various tasks involved in publishing would be nice, it's not in any way necessary in my case. I know how to produce a professional quality book on my own. It takes a lot of work, but I'm not afraid of working hard.

**I'm a Control Freak**

I want the control. I want final say on what my cover looks like and how my book is marketed. Author Tim Ferriss has become increasingly vocal about how important control over his creative work has become, particularly after a difficult experience producing his TV show, The Tim Ferriss Experiment. When Tim Ferriss talks, I listen.

**The Book is Part of a Larger Business Strategy**

Book sales are just one part of my overall business revenue. I make income ghostwriting books for other people, coaching authors, as well as through sales of my online courses, but that doesn't mean consistently publishing extremely high-quality books isn't an essential part of my business model. It's absolutely essential because it builds my authority as a writing and publishing expert. I'm "walking the talk," so to speak. I would have, perhaps, gained some authority by announcing a book contract, but the respect and authority I'm more interested in getting from my clients and potential clients will come via a demonstration of work ethic by way of consistently writing and publishing great books, not signing deals.

**Timelines**

I'm not the most patient person in the world. It takes time to find an agent. It takes more time for that agent to sell a manuscript to a publisher. It takes even more time to slot that book into the publisher's existing publishing schedule. I wanted to get M School into readers’ hands quickly, not spend the next two years watching it move slowly through the machinery of some big corporation.

**Self-Publishing is Punk Rock**

Speaking of big corporations, I grew up playing in punk rock bands. At no point did we ever want to sign a contract with a major label. We just wanted to play awesome songs to a passionate fan base. I approach my writing with that same spirit. I don't write novels or instructional books like this one as some sort of desperate stab at approval and acceptance from corporate America. Art is supposed to be about telling The Man to fuck off, not begging for his approval. The only people I care about impressing are my readers and my clients. Those are the real gatekeepers.

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Will I regret the decision to self-publish as the workload continues piles up and the stress becomes overwhelming? Possibly. But I'll survive.

Then I'll go write another book.

And maybe I'll seek a contract for that one.

**4 Tips for Getting the Most Out of An Online Summit**

Online live-streaming technology continues to improve. As a result, more and more online summits are taking place. This includes summits focused on the world of writing, which bring together dozens of experts who share hours of knowledge and expertise for little more than an email opt-in.

If you haven't yet participated in an online summit, you can think of them as a virtual conference. Summits usually feature presentations and/or interviews with industry influencers delivered via a series of live webinars over several days or weeks.

Online summits offer a variety of ways for attendees to learn and grow. Here's how you can get the most out of the next online summit you attend.

**1. Engage with the Presentations, Take Notes, and Ask Questions**

While many summit presentations feature a product pitch of some kind, this often only comes at the end of a presentation otherwise filled with valuable information. Presenters choose to take part in summits because they are an opportunity for them to get in front of a new audience and demonstrate their expertise. As such, they'll often deliver excellent information in hopes of wooing new fans and clients.

The best way to take advantage of this high quality information is to take notes. Don't just passively view the presentations like you're watching a television show. Instead, look for specific information applicable to the challenges you're currently grappling with and the goals you want to achieve with your writing. Record that information via note taking, and then put the advice and strategies into action following the summit.

Another way to ensure you get the most out of the presentations is to ask questions. One of the most valuable aspects of live webinars, as opposed to recorded training videos, is the audience's ability to interact with a presenter who can tailor responses to that specific audience’s needs.

Many experts are busy individuals who may not have time to answer a question you send them via email, so take advantage of the webinar format of summit presentations to get insights and education from leaders to which you might otherwise not have access.

**2. Identify Influencers**

When I first started learning about book marketing, I kept reading about how I needed to identify influencers in my niche. I remember thinking, I'm totally new to this space, so how am I supposed to figure out who the influencers are?

I soon discovered that online summits are the perfect place to identify influencers. If someone has been invited to participate in a summit, they've likely built a large platform, have developed a strong following, and/or reached a certain level of expertise and success in their chosen industry. As such, they are the people you want to follow, learn from, and engage with as you continue to grow your author career.

I chose to hire Derek Murphy of [Creative Indie](http://www.creativindie.com/) to design the cover of my book [The Page Turners: Economy of Fear](http://amzn.to/29mw0It) after seeing his presentation at Jim Kukral's 2015 Author Marketing Summit. I was conscious that I wasn't only hiring an incredibly talented book designer, but that I was also taking the first step towards developing a relationship with an influencer in the indie publishing world. The relationship never would have happened if not for that summit.

**3. Purchase Products**

Many summits are designed to build up to the sale of a big product (like an online course) by the host at the summit's climax. Presenters will also, at times, make offers during their summit presentations, usually at a discounted price with bonuses thrown in, too.

If a particular summit presenter resonates with you, or if the product they are pitching addresses a need you have, the summit can be a great opportunity to make a purchase, usually at a discounted rate. I'm a big fan of online courses and, as a lifelong learner, I always go into summits with an eye out for new learning opportunities.

**4. Network**

One of the biggest missed opportunities for a lot of people who attend summits is the chance to network with other writers.

Many aspiring authors feel isolated and yearn for a community of people who share similar goals. Summits are an excellent place to make those connections. Most live summit presentations include a chatroom filled with people who share common interests, and many summits also include a Facebook group. Take advantage of these chatrooms and groups to begin developing relationships with other writers as well as reaching out to influencers.

As live streaming technology continues to get better, there is only going to be an increase of summits in which you can take part. Make sure you use these tips to ensure you get the most out of them.

**5 Reasons You Failed to Win National Novel Writing Month**

National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) has come to a close for another year.

A fraction of the writers (around 14%) who participated reached their goal of writing 50,000 words in 30 days. The vast majority of writers (the other 86%) failed to achieve what they set out to do.

If you're reading this, you probably ended up on the wrong side of that 14/86 split.

While I may not know you, I have worked with hundreds of writers just like you over the last several years, and I'm confident I can tell you exactly why you failed to reach the 50,000 word mark. It was almost certainly a combination of the following five reasons.

**1. You didn't have a plan**

By "a plan," I mean a specific writing schedule that identifies when, where, and how many words you were going to write each day. This Writing Plan should also identifiy where you were going to be recording your daily word count, and how you would get back on track for days when you fell behind your word count goals.

You should also have developed a Life Plan that identified mitigation strategies for all those life issues (work, family, chores, other responsibilities) that end up getting in the way of writing.

Did Thanksgiving and all the family, food, and relatives that go along with it distract you from your writing part-way through the month? Well, Thanksgiving happens every year, and you should have prepared for the holiday by working it into your Writing/Life Plans for November.

In the project management world, we call these plans a "critical path." We use the word "critical" because when activities begin to stray from the planned path, it can result in total project failure. If you failed to reach the 50K word mark, it means you probably didn't plan adequately for what was to come.

**2. You didn't do the (absolutely necessary) writer's craft grunt work beforehand**

Writing a novel involves a massive amount of work before the first page is ever written.

Long before you type the words "Chapter 1," you need to have clearly identified what genre you're going to be writing in, where it falls culturally in the genre cycle, and what its obligatory scenes, genre tropes, and key iconography entail.

You also need to have chosen a proven story structure to format your narrative around. I don't care if it's the Hero's Journey, Freytag's pyramid, the Elizabethan five act structure, the Hollywood three act structure, or the Brooks/Weiland four act novel structure. What I do care about is that you chose one before you started writing.

In addition, you need to have done the character work necessary to ensure that on the first day of NaNo, you already knew who your protagonist was, what she wanted, and what she actually needed. You should also have crafted a beat sheet identifying all the major plot points in your narrative, and maybe even expanded some of them out into longer paragraphs or partial scenes.

If you didn't do this work before November 1, you were all but doomed to failure before you even began. These activities are the mandatory grunt work of a writer's craft and they cannot be ignored.

**3. You lacked personalized accountability and motivation**

One of the great things about NaNoWriMo is the way it gathers together a community of writers who can support one another throughout the challenge. This support comes in the form of online forums as well as in real life writing events.

If you failed to reach your goals in November, you either didn't reach out to your local and/or online community of writers, or the community you did reach out to didn't provide you with the amount of accountability you needed in order for you to be successful.

While fellow writers are an essential component of your growth and progress as a writer, you can't expect them to support you the way a writing coach, like myself, would. For example, I recorded 30 motivation videos for my clients participating in NaNo (one for each day), and we changed our bi-weekly group coaching sessions into weekly sessions for the entire month of November. How might those 30 videos and 5 coaching sessions have helped you stay on track?

The fact that you didn't have someone personally invested in your success meant you didn't establish any real stakes or consequences for not completing what you said you would. We're all great at telling ourselves excuses about why we didn't do what we said we were going to do, but telling that same excuse to your writing coach is a whole other thing.

**4. You bottomed out in the Transition Curve**

The steps in any major project can be charted along a Transition Curve, also known as an S Curve. One of the interesting things about NaNoWriMo is it forces writers to experience the transition curve at the accelerated pace.

The transition curve looks like this:

You begin a project with **uninformed optimism**. You don't know what you don't know, and so you're filled with enthusiasm, excitement, and the passion to embark on this new endeavor.

As you work on the project, you begin to absorb feedback via experience, advice, and new information coming into your circle of knowledge. You begin to realize there may be better ways to do things than the way you've been doing them. You also realize the project may not be as easy or as fun as you may have initially thought it was going to be. With this information in hand, you start down the slope of **informed pessimism.**

This slope leads downward to an eventual **crisis of meaning** that looks something like this: "I don't know if my book even has an inciting incident." "What genre is this manuscript? "Can I really do this?" "Did I choose the wrong story?" "Am I good enough?" "Do I know enough?" "Is it worth continuing?" "Should I start over?"

This crisis of meaning is a major transition point, and it's the spot in the transition curve where most writers give up. Faced with the pressure of informed pessimism, they **crash and burn**.

The average number of words written by a NaNo participant is 12K words. That's because by 12K words, most writers have hit that crisis of meaning stage and thrown in the towel.

But there's an alternative to giving up. Long distance runners know this. No matter how well trained, all runners eventually hit "The Wall" at some point. The Wall is that moment when a runner's body tells them they can't run any further.

What good runners know, and what smart writers learn, is that we all have the ability to push through The Wall.

On the other side of the wall, the other side of that crisis of meaning, you're going discover the wisdom of experience, and with that wisdom, you'll begin ramping up a new slope of**informed optimism.**

Ask any writer who was successful at writing 50K words last month, and they'll tell you there wasn't just one wall, but many walls they had to push through to find success.

Did you push through walls last month, or smack up against them?

**5. Writing a novel is REALLY difficult**

Statistics suggest 81% of people, when surveyed, say they want to write a book, but few people actually ever do it. This is because it's understood, intuitively, that writing a book is a major challenge.

That said, the amount of heart, soul, energy, and mental complexity involved in writing a novel is still significantly underestimated by almost everyone.

Writing a book is much harder than most people think, and if you failed to reach your goals last month, you know this to be true.

Editor Shawn Coyne suggests learning to write well is a process that can be summed up with the following equation:

M (mechanics) + TEn (trial and error) = IF (inner feeling)

If you didn't achieve your goals last month, if you don't yet have that inner feeling of accomplishment, you're probably lacking in both the M (i.e. education in writer's craft) and the trial and errors to the Nth, which stands for however many times trial and errors takes (i.e. experience in writing a long form narratives).

The fact that you might be lacking in elements or that one of the five challenges I've covered in this chapter stood in your way last month is perfectly fine.

In fact, I've got some really good news for you...

I called this chapter "5 Reasons You Failed to Win NaNo," but the truth is: You didn't fail anything!

There is no winning or losing when it comes to art.

NaNoWriMo is a writing exercise. No more, no less. It's no different from daily journaling or doing a character worksheet. It's just a cognitive framework (i.e. an idea, not a real thing) designed to encourage writers to get words on the page by identifying goals and using terms like "winner" as motivation.

As fun and as motivating as that framework may be for some people, the reality is that writing isn't a sport. There are no winners and losers.

To write a novel is to engage oneself in the infinitely rewarding experience known as the creative process, and by engaging in that process, you have already won.

When art is created, everyone wins. Society benefits. The world gets better. I believe that to be true with all my heart.

Last month was a success because you tried. You did it. You put your hat in the ring and took the chance to try something crazy and different from what most people do with their time.

Regardless of how many words you ultimately get down, you created something. You partook in the creative process and the only way you can lose at the creative process is by giving up.

You only lose when you stop writing.

**The Money Thing**

Many aspiring authors have told me their goal is to publish a book, and, in doing so, generate enough income to quit their day job.

Unfortunately, this is not a realistic goal.

I'm not betting against aspiring authors when I make this judgment. Their books very well might become smash hits. That said, it's still not a realistic goal because books are just not a good business to get rich in – the profit margin is too thin.

Let's do some rough math.

Say you're selling a print-on-demand paperback book for $15 via Amazon's CreateSpace. The book is going to cost about $5 in CreateSpace printing costs and shipping, while Amazon is going to take another $5 as their cut of the book. That leaves you with about a $5 profit per book.

A $5 profit per book means, if you want to leave a $50,000 a year day job, you're going to need to sell 10,000 paperback books. Making 10,000 book sales means your book is a massive hit. It's difficult to sell that many books, but it's not impossible. You could totally do it.

The problem is you're going to need to have another massive hit next year, and then every single year after that until you retire.

That's a tall order for any author.

Generating enough income via book sales alone to quit a day job just isn't realistic for 99% of authors.

But here's the thing . . . I still think you should write and publish books.

You absolutely should!

Publishing books has transformed my life and it will transform yours as well.

Becoming an author has enriched my existence in dozens of ways that have nothing to do with books sales, business, or money.

In 2015, I published a children's picture book, [Rocket Princess vs. Snaggletooth the Dragon](http://www.kevintjohns.com/rocketprincess/). I've sold few copies of the book. In fact, I haven't yet earned back the money I invested in commissioning the illustrations. Yet I consider the book one of my biggest successes as an author.

Why would I consider a book that has lost me money a success?

I consider it a success because, after publishing the book, I was invited to read Rocket Princess to my daughter Alyssa's pre-school class, as well as my daughter Jillian's kindergarten class.

My daughters were so proud to see their dad in their classroom reading his book to their classmates. The kids in the room loved hearing the story read by the author. My wife even came and watched both times. Doing those readings was personally rewarding in a way books sales or a check from Amazon will never be.

Writing a book, creating art of any kind, is about more than sales. It's about more than branding, marketing, and money. It's about connecting with readers. It's about creating something new. It's about spreading joy and entertaining an audience.

You aren't going to get monetarily rich publishing a book, but you will absolutely live a richer life. I promise you that.

**Bonus**

Insert audio book offer here. Too be drafted.