

The 30-Day Novel

11 Steps to Go from Blank Page to
First Draft THIS MONTH



Adam Hughes

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By Adam Hughes

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Introduction

Have you always wanted to write a novel but never quite got around to it?

If so, this book is for you.

But before we get into *why* this book is for you, know this: you're in good company.

According to a [2002 survey](#), approximately 200 million Americans had “write a novel” on their bucket list, but only about 80,000 of us had actually made good on that promise to ourselves. And that was in 2002! It's a good bet both of those numbers have grown significantly with the explosion of digital publishing.

That means there are STILL millions of aspiring authors roaming the streets at any given time looking for a) a good story idea, b) the time to turn that idea into a novel, or c) the guts and dedication to sit down and bang out the words that will get them there.

How many aspirants will eventually get off the wall and dance? That's impossible to predict, but it's going to be a darn small percentage for sure.

The problem is that writing a novel is hard enough that even getting started can be a daunting task. Where do you turn for help when you get stuck? And where is the motivation to continue the Sisyphean effort required to write a book when there are *thousands* of new tomes produced every month?

Several years ago, Chris Baty came up with at least a partial answer in the form of [National Novel Writing Month](#), or NaNoWriMo. The idea behind NaNoWriMo was to ask aspiring (or established) writers to set aside November for, you guessed it, writing their novels.

The notion was to write a first draft of a complete, coherent, end-to-end novel of at least 50,000 words between November 1 and December 1.

That concept struck a chord with scribes everywhere, and they converged on turkey month in droves. In an instant, a family of aspiring writers was born, all with similar dreams and, more importantly, similar obstacles to reaching their goals. Eventually, they gathered in Internet forums and local writers groups to talk about their processes, their victories, their failures.

They held each other up in times of weakness, and they held each other accountable.

Since that initial NaNoWriMo, the number of participants has grown from 21 to more than 400,000 in 2015. Along the way, more than 300,000 authors have “won” NaNoWriMo, with more than 60,000 crossing the finish line in November in 2014 alone.

The most powerful lesson from NaNoWriMo is that *you can do it*. You really can write a novel in 30 days if you buckle down the right way. And you can do it again and again, month after month, if that’s your goal.

But even with all of the support built in to NaNoWriMo and all the excitement that surrounds the event, many thousands of writers come up short each year.

And it all comes back to that one simple reason: **writing a novel is hard**.

*It’s **hard** to come up with a good idea.*

*It’s **hard** to plan out how that idea will translate to a novel.*

*It’s **hard** to make that commitment to writing, both to yourself and to those you love.*

*And, maybe most of all, it’s **hard** to sit down and write, day after day, whether you feel like it or not.*

The good news is that it doesn’t have to be **that** hard to write a novel and to do it in a short span of time. All you need is a path you can follow toward the destination you want to reach.

A simple step-by-step plan that helps you set up for writing success and that provides the framework to keep you going day after day.

And that’s the purpose of this book.

In the next 11 chapters, I’ll present the exact steps you can take to write the first draft of your novel this fall. It’s the same process I’ve used to “win” the last two NaNoWriMo events, and it’s a formula I know will work if **you** are also willing to put in the work.

You *can* write your book — at least in draft form — in 30 days or less, no matter which month it is.

Before we get started, though, I want to talk about planning for a moment.

If you’re an aspiring writer — one who dreams and reads and talks about writing — then you’ve undoubtedly heard the romantic stories about Stephen King and other

masters who just sit down and bleed out a story based on some nebulous idea that's been rattling around in their brains. Their characters lead them on the path they're going to take, and the authors serve as simple mediums through which the story is told.

That's a great visual and inspiring as all get-out, but trying to emulate that process is a sure path to writer's block and ultimate failure for most writers. Stephen King is at the far right of the writer's bell curve and can do things with words and stories that most of us can only dream about doing. I have about as much chance of emulating King's success in novel-writing by following his methods as I would of leading a basketball team to the NBA championship by following LeBron James' training regimen.

Most of us mortal writers will get much further with a bit of planning than we will if we try to get by with "pantsing" — writing by the seat of our pants and relying on moment-to-moment inspiration to see us through. This is especially true if you're trying to write a novel in the span of a month and *especially* especially true if that kind of schedule is new to you.

So we're going to do some **planning** in this book. You don't have to, of course. You can "pants" your way through a 30-day novel-writing challenge (or try to), but I don't have much advice for you if that's the vector you want to follow. If you're intimidated by the thought of planning out certain aspects of your book, don't sweat it too much. What we'll do here is not complicated, and it won't take much time. Most of your effort will be spent writing, not planning, even if the sheer number of steps skews toward planning.

Anyway, it's far *more* intimidating to sit down without a clue about what you're going to do each day.

Now, just one more aside before we get down to the meat of your journey.

Who Is This Book For?

I wrote this book for a couple of reasons.

One is to help me solidify my own process and clarify it for myself, for the next time I undertake a large writing project. (That would be most months these days, FYI.)

The second is because I think my process can help other writers who are like me.

In particular, I hope this book will be useful for folks who want to write a book in a relatively short period of time but who don't really have much wiggle room in their schedules.

Anyone who has wanted to write a novel for years but has never quite gotten around to it might also find this book helpful.

First-time novel writers can use the process I describe here to win their challenge, but so can repeaters who have had trouble finishing the deal in the past.

This book probably *won't* be great for everyone, though. If you're an established author with several books under your belt, I don't have much room to give you advice about writing. Likewise, if you blow past the NaNoWriMo goals with ease every November, then you may not get much from my process. You obviously have one of your own that works just fine for you.

I like to think we can all learn pretty much all the time, though, so there may be a few nuggets in these pages that will be valuable to even seasoned authors.

In the end, only you can decide if you're going to read about my process and whether you'll adopt it — or part of it — as your own. Either way, I'd love to hear what you think, by email (adam@themoonlightingwriter.com) or through a review if you prefer.

Before any of that can happen, though, I suppose I should tell you about my process. Finally, then, here are my “**11 Steps to Go from Blank Page to First Draft THIS MONTH**” ...

STEP 1: Make the Commitment

Are You Too CHICKEN To Finish Your Novel?

A grizzled old physics professor once told me that the secret to success in any endeavor lay in a simple breakfast favorite.

“The chicken is *involved* in making your plate of ham and eggs,” Herr Professor said. “The pig is *committed* to it. Be the pig.”

While you may question how “successful” a dead pig can be, there is no denying that he gave everything he possibly could to that morning meal.

This is a silly little parable, to be sure, but it holds some value for “aspiring” writers when it comes to finishing a novel.

I mean, how committed are you — REALLY — to writing a novel in November, or in any particular month or period of time?

Are you willing to do some **planning** to make finishing your book possible?

Can you put in the **work** necessary to set yourself up for success?

Will you find the **discipline** to give up something in order to achieve your goal?

Do you have the **guts** to make writing your book a priority, even if it means changing your life?

These are the cornerstone questions of **commitment**, and you need to decide right now — *are you ready to commit fully to writing your novel?*

If you are, then here are some steps you can take toward hardening that commitment right from the start and giving yourself the best possible chance of success.

- 1. Sign up for [NaNoWriMo](#).** Even if you’re writing your book some other time than November, signing up for NaNoWriMo will put you in touch with other authors going through a similar journey as you. Head to the forums and introduce yourself. Tell you’re writing your novel and will be done by whatever date you plan to be done. Instant public accountability.

2. Tell your friends and family. There isn't much worse in life than letting down those people who are closest to you. By bringing them into your plans from the start, you not only gain their support but you also put tremendous positive pressure on yourself to finish what you started. Can you imagine telling your son that you're writing a book, watching his face light up in excitement, and then crashing his hopes by wimping out? Me either.

3. Complete the first eight steps in this book NOW. As I mentioned in the introduction, my process for winning a NaNoWriMo involves a fair amount of planning: eight steps' worth, in fact. Now, don't get too nervous about that because all of them together will probably take you less than a day to accomplish, but they're vitally important. And once you have everything in place, there is really no excuse to NOT write that novel. So the sooner you lay your tracks, the more sure you'll feel about making it to the end.

4. Write down your commitment. This one may seem corny, but you need to make a concrete promise to yourself that you're going to put in the work to finish your novel in the next 30 days. Do it somewhere you're sure to see it every day. We'll talk more about scheduling later on, but one good place for this self-commitment is in your daily calendar. For now, just make an entry on each day that says "Novel" or "writing" or something else that is meaningful to you.

With these four micro-promises in place, you should have all of the motivation you need to take on the task in front of you.

If you're having trouble embracing any of these four, then you should probably ask yourself again: "How much do I really want to write a book?"

There's nothing inherently *wrong* with eschewing commitment, but you should realize that you won't get very far with half-assed efforts and a lack of solid buy-in from the most important person of all — you!

Now ... have you made up your mind? Ready to proceed?

Great!

Take your first four baby steps — those listed above — and roll forward in your quest to finally write your novel. Stay pig-headed in your commitment for the next 30 days, and you'll be amazed by your accomplishment.

Don't be a chicken.

Be the pig.

STEP 2: Find Your Story

I have to admit that I don't fully understand the woes of writers who struggle to find topics for their novels.

For me, ideas spring from all corners — my dreams, the people I meet, the books I read, old photos — everywhere. I suspect this is true for most writers and other artists, too.

The more pressing problems in those cases are how to translate the idea into a tangible form and how to stay focused on just ONE idea long enough to spit out a completed work.

And, if you're reading this book in particular, then you *must* have an idea spinning in your brain or you wouldn't have the burning need to write a novel in the first place.

But I will allow that there may be some folks who really want to write but are just “stuck” when it comes to picking the theme of their next novel. I imagine this might be the case for prolific authors who have been writing for decades, although guys like Dean Koontz and Stephen King seem to have a bottomless well of good ideas from which to work.

Nevertheless, if you find yourself lacking for an idea or trying to decide *which* idea is best, there are a few methods you can use to get your creative gears turning.

Here are some of the best.

Writing Prompts

In case you're not familiar with them, writing prompts are short hypothetical scenarios intended to serve as story starters. They often take the form of one-to-three-sentence blurbs, but other formats exist, too, including photos, videos, and audio clips.

Before blogs and e-books made information available all the time to everyone, writing prompts existed mainly to prod reluctant writing students into action.

Teachers or professors would present one or more writing prompts to their pupils, who would then craft stories or essays around the prompts.

For students unaccustomed to plucking story ideas from the air, or from overheard

conversations, prompts could take them to places they might never have gone otherwise.

Today, you don't have to be a student in order to take advantage of writing prompts. With just a bit of Googling, you can find blurbs to fit most any genre or occasion, and there are even full websites devoted to writing prompts.

Some of my favorite sources include:

- Chuck Wendig's weekly Flash Fiction Challenge at terribleminds.com
- Writing.com [writing contests](http://writingcontests.com)
- FlashFictionFriday.com
- FridayFlashFiction.com
- [Creative Writing Prompts](http://CreativeWritingPrompts.com) at Writer's Digest
- The [Writing Prompts reddit](http://WritingPromptsReddit.com)

This is hardly an exhaustive list, of course, and you can find many more great sources of writing prompts with a simple Google search.

You can also find entire books full of writing prompts, and smaller lists like my free mini-book, [51 Terrifying Writing Prompts](http://51TerrifyingWritingPrompts.com).

As fun as they are, using writing prompts do come with some danger, because it's easy to get caught in a loop of writing "exercises" that pull you away from what you should be doing — finishing your novel or story.

But used judiciously during your brainstorming phase, writing prompts can help you come up with the perfect idea for your next book.

Take a Walk

Walking is good for you because it gets your blood moving and helps you avoid the physical ills that come with sitting at a desk all day long.

But walking can *also* be very good for uncovering story ideas, for a couple of reasons.

First, walking gives you a change of scenery and allows you to bust out of whatever four walls you inhabit. When you walk, forget about your troubles for awhile and let your thoughts ramble. Chain those thoughts together over the course of 10 or fifteen minutes, and you may be surprised by the ideas that spring from your burst of physical activity.

Beyond breaking the monotony of your day, taking a walk also offers other benefits to you as a writer. In particular, depending on WHERE you walk, your physical surroundings can kick up all sorts of story ideas.

Work in a high-rise? Walk up or down a few flights of stairs and stroll through other departments or the public areas of other companies in your building. Or head downstairs, all the way, and walk around the block to see what's happening in the city. Why is that elderly lady buying a bodybuilding magazine at the newsstand? Where did the business man in a three-piece suit get a hot roasted corn on the cob at 10 am on a Tuesday morning?

Fill in the blanks, and you might find a great story.

Or maybe you work in a factory in a more desolate location? Use your break times to walk amongst your co-workers and try to overhear some of their conversations. Or step outside and hike around the building to see what you can find. Where is that plane high in sky headed? What types of people are driving by on the roads outside? Or, if you're really isolated, can you imagine what it would be like if your factory were the ONLY remaining vestige of humanity after some catastrophe?

Getting up and moving around can do wonders for your state of mind, and it's a simple way to grow some new story ideas.

Read a Book

This may be an obvious suggestion, but sometimes the MOST obvious ideas are right in front of your face.

If you're a writer or want to be a writer, chances are pretty good that you read a lot. And if you don't, what are you waiting for?

Stephen King has been quoted as saying that the best way to become a better writer is to write a lot. And the second best way to become a better writer is to READ a lot.

That's not hyperbole, because only by reading can you learn the nuances of language that separate great writing from mediocre or poor writing. Only by reading will you understand how the unwritten rules of each genre play out in the pages of novels and short stories. And only by reading will you gain an appreciation for the style of writing that resonates most with you and which you might want to emulate.

But reading — especially reading fiction — has a benefit that you may not have considered.

In particular, every book and story you read is an encyclopedia of potential story ideas for you to use in your own writing.

I'm not talking about lifting the story line from *A Tale of Two Cities* and plagiarizing Dickens with a thin knockoff (*Indianapolis v. Terre Haute: Who's Yer Village*, maybe?).

Rather, pay attention to the edges of the main themes in the books you read. There are all sorts of tales hiding in the shadows of most works of fiction that can blossom into entire new worlds.

For instance, and to pull from Dickens again, there is one scene in *A Christmas Carol* where a couple of fund-raising gentlemen accost Scrooge and ask him for money. When he demurs, they chide him before moving on about their business.

Could one or both of those fellows, or someone like them, form the backbone of a good story? Maybe they themselves are corrupt businessmen using charity as a front. Or maybe they are actually some of the homeless they claim to represent, looking to better their own lot in the name of society as a whole.

You get the idea, but if you decide to key off one of these characters, you don't have to delve into fan fiction — though there has been plenty of hay made by fanfic authors in recent years. You can pick up one of these dudes, turn him into a woman or an alien or a dog, change his race or creed or other characteristics, and plop him into an entire new setting, leaving Victorian England behind forever.

The same can be said for items and places in the books you read, or even side plots that don't go as far as you wish they would have.

You might even consider an alternate handling of the same story line. For instance, would you have saved Scrooge and, by extension, Tiny Tim, or would you have taken the story to a darker place?

Books are a great escape — maybe THE great escape. But you can also use them for inspiration, and you're probably missing out on some of your best story ideas if you read without looking for these opportunities.

Watch a Movie

Much like novels, movies provide a wonderful diversion from daily life and can transport you to faraway places.

But, also like novels, movies can be a source of story ideas if you open your mind to the possibilities.

Maybe you find *The Raiders of the Lost Ark* to have a far-fetched storyline, but isn't it intriguing to think the Holy Grail actually exists and might be uncovered some day? Doesn't it make you wonder what other legendary artifacts are out there, just waiting for someone to discover them? What kind of story would you write, and with what kinds of characters, that might lead to such a revelation?

Or maybe you like your movies a little more realistic. Think about Reese Witherspoon in *Wild*, the story of a young woman who embarks on a 1000-mile hike through the wilderness to try and figure out her life. The main character in this case made it through without any catastrophic mishaps, but what if you change the setting to the Mexican desert and switch from a single woman to a married couple? What kinds of adventures might they have?

Beyond plot, characters, and settings, movies also offer up plenty of visual and audio prompts that can get your story chops working overtime. From sweeping landscapes to event horizons to zombie apocalypses, modern movies are stunning in their cinematography, and you can imagine all sorts of tales to fit any given frame of a movie. Similarly, close your eyes for a moment and listen to the dialog or background noise of the next film you see. Can you dream up a set of characters or setting that matches the sounds you hear?

Enjoy movies for the diversion they provide, but don't overlook them as a source of inspiration. Like reading a good book, watching a good movie can be an interactive adventure for a writer in search of his muse.

Visit the Past

When were you at your wide-eyed, creative best?

If you're like most adults, it was sometime during your childhood.

When we were kids, everything was possible. Cars could fly, monsters lived under your bed, summers lasted forever, and you could be President if you wanted.

As we get older, though, and the responsibilities of day-to-day life mount up, we tend to narrow our focus. At first, we pull in our daily activities, cutting recess and adding in more schoolwork.

Soon, we're working at the local burger joint rather than reading fantasy novels on a

rainy summer weekday afternoon.

Before we know it, we're married with children and working in a nine-to-five that sometimes seems to have chosen us rather than the other way around.

Now, there is nothing wrong with having a family and a job. In fact, I think they are very grounding and make me better than I ever could have been twisting out there in the world on my own.

But there is no denying adults have less fanciful thoughts than we did when we were younger and, as a result, we often metamorphosize into unimaginative dolts.

If you find yourself in this situation, what can you do to regain that youthful spark of hope and creativity that once drove you to do things like building blanket forts or making mud pies?

Simple: return to the scene of the crime!

Think about WHERE you were when you were at your most creative. Was it the grade school playground, the library, your bedroom, or maybe the city park?

Wherever it was, take a break from your busy schedule and go there again. Of course, some of your favorite places to unleash your imagination when you were younger might no longer exist, but you can find decent proxies if you open your eyes.

If you're a parent, visit your child at school for lunch and recess (if the school allows).

If you no longer live in your hometown, visit the park in your current city. If your childhood room was your muse but you no longer have access to it, go to a toy store (real or online) and imagine how you would have played with the goodies there when you were young.

You can't live in the past, but you should consider *visiting* if you want to stoke your imaginative fires. Grab onto your childhood and let it propel you once again to creative heights that maybe you thought were gone forever.

Go to a Graveyard

This one may seem a bit macabre, but it doesn't have to be.

There is no denying that graveyards can be sad, creepy places. Another view is that

they are a final, eternal celebration of the lives represented on their gravestones and monuments.

This latter interpretation can pay big dividends for a writer looking for new characters or even a plot line for his next novel.

See those markers for the man who died in the mid 19th century and his wife who died in the 20th century. It's clear from the dates that she was his second (or third) wife, but where is his first spouse buried, and why aren't *they* together?

And how about that unusual stone in the back corner of the cemetery ... why is it so much darker and larger than all the rest? And what does the spider carved into the bottom of the marker mean? Or what about the drape half-covering the top?

There is plenty of symbolism to be found in graveyards, especially older ones, and you can incorporate this into your stories.

You can also make up your own interpretations or fill in the gaps left between the born-on and died-on dates of the grave markers. Every person, dead or alive, has a multitude of stories to tell. Your job is to uncover them — or infer them — and then tell the world through your writing.

Pull Out Old Photo Albums

Every family has an overbearing grandmother or crazy old aunt who insists on photographing *everyone* at EVERY family gathering, year after year after year.

Or at least that's the way it was before cell phones won their campaign for our hearts and placed a decent-quality camera in the hands of every man, woman, and child in America. Now we all take pictures all the time, and most of them end up online.

But in Grandma Sara's heyday, not everyone had access to a camera, and almost no one had the patience to use one regularly.

Grandma did, though.

She could stop any party cold just by showing up, coaxing a chorus of groans from adults and splashing waves of sheer panic over children when her camera appeared.

“Stand over there by Uncle Howie, sweetheart.”

“Everyone say, ‘Trees’!”

“Now, Joey, you were picking your nose. We’ll have to do it all again!”

On and on and on, Grandma’s photo sessions went.

But you know what?

She captured a lifetime’s worth of stories through her lenses. Chances are, she was taking family photos long before you ever twinkled in her viewfinder, and her work can be a treasure trove for you as a writer.

If your family shutterbug is still alive, find some time to sit down with her and ask her about the history of your tribe. Even if you don’t know most of the people she remembers, the tales may surprise and inspire you.

And, whether Grandma Sara is still with you or not, her treasure trove of images might be.

Find them. Pull them down off the dusty shelf in Cousin Ronnie’s spare bedroom.

Pour through them like archaeological discoveries. What were these people doing? Who were they to you? What would they be doing now if there were still living?

And then, write.

Go to the Grocery Store

With few exceptions, the greatest tales in the world are about individual people and the way they interact with each other. So, if you’re having trouble coming up with a story idea, it makes sense to surround yourself with people and see what you can learn from them.

A great place to do this is the grocery store, because everyone has to eat. And, aside from the really rich or famous just about everybody ends up at the market now and then, which means your local supermarket also holds a ready supply of human stories across a wide spectrum.

See that old couple over there in the coffee aisle? What’s the *real* reason they’re arguing so vehemently over the choice between Folgers and Maxwell House?

And the guy in the three-piece suit standing at the deli ... he’s deep in conversation with his cell phone. Who is on the other end?

There's no way you missed Sammy's visit, either. *No one* overlooks Sammy with his loud voice, outrageous clothes, and questionable personal hygiene. Did you ever consider what Sammy's personal background is? What makes him such a character?

All of these folks have stories that can inspire your writing. You have just to watch, listen ... and create.

—

Truly, there are great story ideas everywhere you look and in the conversations you have everyday.

If you haven't decided on your novel's theme, now is the time to pick out the methods above that appeal most to you and settle on the tale you want to tell.

Don't spend too much time fretting over which of several ideas is best, though, because you can write them all over time. In fact, you will probably be *compelled* to write them all at some point.

If there is one thing I've learned about writing, it's that story ideas, once revealed, refuse to die. They all come back to you in their good time.

STEP 3: Pick Your Structure

Now that you know *which* story you're going to write, it's time to build a framework around which to write it. The first step toward that goal is to pick a story structure.

“Story structure” can mean different things to different people, but for us in this context, it's simply the list of major plot points you need to hit in order to take your novel from opening sentence to “The End” in a way that will make your story complete.

It's true that some authors, like the example of Stephen King we discussed in the introduction, probably don't need to think much about story structure and do just fine by letting their scenes unfold organically.

Those are the Nikola Teslas of the writing world.

For the rest of us mere mortals, story structure is very important for guiding our first draft, which is really the end product of your month-long sprint. When we go back for edits and rewrites, cohesiveness trumps strict construct and the lines between the plot points may start to blur.

To start, though, and to “win” a 30-day writing challenge, most writers will be best served by having a solid framework in place.

Here are a few story structures you might consider, starting with the one I recommend as a default foundation.

Seven-Point Story Structure

As the name implies, the seven-point story structure consists of seven main story points:

- **Hook**

The hook is the big question, event, twist, or turn that pulls the reader in and makes him say, “What the heck is going on here? I've got to know what happens next!” It usually comes very near the beginning of your novel and compels the reader to dig into the world you've built just beyond that opening chapter.

- **First Plot Point**

The first plot point is the first major event in your book, and it's the one that sends your main character down the path he'll follow for the rest of the novel. It usually occurs around the one-quarter mark of your story and takes your protagonist out of his “normal”

world, never to return.

- **First Pinch Point**

A pinch point is an event that gives us a glimpse into your character's struggle, the one that will drive him to change ... something. Maybe his estranged father calls, and it motivates him to be a better dad to his own kids. Or maybe his boss finds out that he lied about his educational background, and it spurs him into a cathartic coming-clean in other areas of his life. Whatever the case, pinch points apply pressure to your protagonist, and the first one drives him toward the ...

- **Midpoint**

At the midpoint of your story, the main character decides on his mission and takes action, leaving behind any chance of returning to his previous life. Or something happens that makes his old life impossible: Andy Dufresne locks the doors to the prison "library" and blares music over the PA; the Titanic hits the iceberg. Nothing can ever be the same from this point forward, and your hero has to figure out what to do.

- **Second Pinch Point**

More pressure for your hero in the second pinch point: his medical tests come back, he loses his job, his wife busts him for *ahem* *unusual* Internet activity. Whatever the case, things change again, and that change hurtles him toward the ...

- **Second Plot Point**

During the second plot point, your protagonist figures out how to solve his problem or realizes it's time to give up on a relationship or uncovers the walled-up body that's tethering the malevolent ghost to the rickety old house. This part of the story sets up your final conflict and turns your character toward his destiny (, Luke).

- **Resolution**

This is the bring-it-home moment, when all of your loose ends get knotted into one big ball of, well, resolution. Your hero finds the girl, or maybe he kills the girl. He buys the company and kicks his old boss to the curb. If you're writing Star Wars fan fiction, your guy probably loses a hand or cuts off someone else's hand. As long as you wrap up your story so that your characters can move on with a somewhat normal life, you're golden. The exception, of course, is a cliffhanger. Then your resolution might answer *some* questions, but you leave at least one big one open and raw.

Freytag's Pyramid, or the Five-Part Story Structure

This is the story architecture you usually learn about in high school English, and it consists of the following parts:

- **Exposition:** You explain the basic idea or background of the story, and you probably hint at the main conflict.
- **Rising Action:** Your protagonist encounters whatever foes are threatening to disrupt his life, and the conflict gets more heated or more imminent or more concrete. Tensions rise.
- **Climax:** The climax is the culmination of your hero's hopes and fears into a flurry of action that will leave his world changed forevermore. Most of the "action" action happens here.
- **Falling Action:** The battle is done, but the aftermath is just beginning. Your main character must pick up the pieces of his shattered/altered/terminated life and prepare for what comes next, whether that is exile, reconciliation, ascension to heaven, or some other transformed reality.
- **Resolution:** Your protagonist has made his decision and made his peace, and he's ready to move on in his new world.

Freytag's pyramid works for most stories in the sense that you can shoehorn them into the structure, but action-packed stories may suffer from having their climax fall in the middle of the book. Dedicating half your story to falling action and resolution can be wonderful for exploring the human condition, but it's often lacking if you're trying to make your readers' hearts go pitter-patter.

The Fichtean Curve

The Fichtean curve distills story structure to three parts:

- **Crises:** You throw the reader right into the rising action and take your hero through a series of escalating challenges for the first two-thirds of the book.
- **Climax:** Once your character is beaten and broken and on the verge of either ultimate defeat or glorious victory, you drive him, *bam*, into the climax.
- **Falling Action:** The titanic "battle" of the climax should leave your reader breathless and your protagonist figuring out his own new world order. The falling action "falls" pretty quickly to the end of the book and helps establish his new normal. You can resolve outstanding issues or open questions for a sequel, but you need to leave your hero in a fairly stable position or at least headed in that direction.

The Fichtean Curve is one of the more common structures used in novels and movies, and it is well-suited to building suspense.

The Hero's Journey

The Hero's Journey is the *de facto* default for sweeping adventures and has been around for centuries, from Ancient Greece to the Bible to today's popular fantasy novels.

- **Call to Adventure:** Someone, something, or some event pulls at your main character and implores him to step up. The king is killed at the hands of alien looters, and the gentry cower in fear, waiting to be slain. Who will save the empire? Chad Jackson, trusty palace guard, seems a logical choice (though that's your case to make).
- **Acceptance of Call:** After some deliberation, your protagonist decides that, yes, the fate of humanity does rest on his shoulders. He picks up the gauntlet, maybe reluctantly, maybe with verve, and the battle is on.
- **Rising Action:** The hero moves toward his encounter with destiny, whether that involves a physical relocation or a mental/psychological/intellectual shift. Chad Jackson learns to joust and makes peace with the idea that he will have to get friendly with one of the dragons, long his mortal enemies. Together, they fly to the mountain lair where the aliens have encamped while preparing to take down the kingdom for good.
- **Defeat, Death, and Rebirth:** Your hero engages in battle with whatever dark force compelled him on his journey. In some way or another, he dies and is reborn. Maybe that entails *actual* death and resurrection, but more likely, it's all symbolic. Chad vows to his wife that he'd honor Batman throughout the ordeal, claiming victory without bloodshed. Once he starts to fight, he soon realizes how foolish that promise was and finds himself inches from death until he decides to strike out at Glog, the alien ruler. Meager, milquetoast Chad dies when he slays the beast, reborn as a fearsome warrior.
- **Atonement:** After the major battle, your protagonist is not the same and likely realizes that he's done some things he wishes he could have avoided. Somehow, he must find a way to redeem his character in his own eyes and reclaim the respect that others may have lost for him. After slaughtering an army of space warriors, Chad finds a hidden enclave of space children spirited away in the folds of a mountain. He loads them on his dragon and promises that no harm will come to them.

- **Journey Home:** Heroes generally have a strong sense of place, and they are heroes because they have served and/or saved their own homes, wherever those may be. After their battles, heroes must go home, even if it's not simple to get there.
- **New Normal:** You can't slay demons and travel the world (or beyond) and then come home and expect to eat at McDonald's in peace. Things are different when you're a hero, and your protagonist must figure out how to adjust to his new life. Chad is anointed the new king, and he and his wife must acclimate to their new digs, surrounded by a clan of alien kids and a stable of pet dragons.

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There are other structures you can adopt, of course, but one of these should work in most cases. A quick Google search will show you other options, but I would advise you not to spend too much time here. Pick a structure that is likely to work and move on, because the straight lines delineating the parts of *whichever* architecture you choose will become blurred when you start to edit and/or rewrite that rough draft down the line. Continuity will demand it.

So how do you pick the story structure that's *likely* to be right for your book?

Start by thinking (again) about the story you have planned for your novel — it's been on your mind for awhile now, so this should be easy. Can you see how the arc of your story might break down across the story points in each structure? Do you know how you'll "hook" your audience and how you'll bring your plot to a satisfying conclusion? How about the points in between?

You can probably eliminate one or more of the structures right off the bat depending on the type of story you're writing. If, for example, you want to suck the reader into a nail-biting thriller from the first paragraph, then Freytag's Pyramid is probably not your best bet.

Likewise, there may be one of the structures that's a near-perfect fit. Writing an epic adventure that features a young girl who travels the world to *save* the world? The Hero's Journey is tailor-made for you.

If you've considered the options and maybe even looked for a couple more but still can't decide, then go with the seven-point story structure. It's a capable structure for most types of stories, and it will keep you moving forward.

STEP 4: Pick Your Tools

Modern writers have several huge advantages over scribes from the past, and none looms larger than the plethora of tools available for engaging with our craft.

Fifty years ago, authors had a very limited arsenal with which to work: pads of paper, pens, a typewriter (maybe), a desk lamp, a dictionary, a thesaurus, coffee, a pack of cigarettes, and an ashtray. Not much else was available, and not much else was really needed, but the writing process could be even longer and more arduous than it is today. If you are old enough to have written a school paper by typewriter and suffered through a few typos, then you know what I mean.

Twenty years ago, the list was much the same, but word processors had already revolutionized typing speed and editing. No longer did our typing have to be perfect the first time through since we could just backspace and query-replace our way to cleaner copy. Notwithstanding that huge advancement, though, the writer's toolbelt was pretty much the same as it was at mid-century.

Today, a whole generation of writers has sprung up without much help from pen or paper, typewriters have been relegated to antique stores, (almost) no one smokes, and even modern word processors are unrecognizable by 1990s standards. It seems that coffee remains as the loan thread connecting authors across the ages, from Twain to Camus to King to ... you.

In fact, the array of tools available to us can be dizzying if you let yourself be seduced by the bells and whistles. But you don't need to get too fancy to glean the full benefits of the electronic writing age. With just a few key implements, you can wring the most from your efforts.

Here are the tools I recommend ...

Word Processor

If you use only one modern gadget during your novel-writing journey, it should be a good word processor. With a word processor, you can let your fingers fly without worrying about mistakes because you can always go back and fix them later.

A word processor also lets you copy and paste, move text around in small chunks or whole chapters, and mark up your copy with notes and redactions when it (finally) comes time for editing. And, as with most other aspects of life in the 21st century, your choices

are just about limitless when it comes to picking a solid wordsmithing tool.

So, which is the best word processor for you? It depends on your long-term goals, finances, personal preferences, and history, but here are a few of the best options.

Microsoft Word: *Word* is the default choice in word processors for writers and non-writers alike, and for good reason. It offers a full complement of basic and fancy formatting options, and most people already know how to use the product. It's a modern birthright (or something) that we come out of the womb with prepackaged knowledge of the Office suite. Kudos to Microsoft for tying millions of people to their wares and for making them nearly ubiquitous — you can even use Word on a Mac!

Word does have its downsides, though, not the least of which is cost. If your computer does not already have *Word* installed, you're looking at a \$70-100 purchase PLUS about the same amount every year for Office 365 (optional). The latter gives you mobile and cloud features that Office has traditionally lacked, which is another potential drawback of the suite. Unless you're willing to pony up the requisite fees, *Word* locks you in to one machine and makes working from multiple locations clumsy at best (though a cloud storage solution like Dropbox alleviates much of this strife).

Google Docs: Google revolutionized how we search and interact with the Internet.

In many ways, and for many users, Google *Apps* revolutionized the way we create content of all sorts. Hosted entirely online, Google Apps provides direct alternatives for most of the Microsoft Office suite offerings, including Sheets (Excel), Presentation (PowerPoint), and Docs (Word).

Sheets and Presentation are powerful, convenient tools for tracking your work (Sheets), recording ideas (Sheets), making graphic novels (Presentation), and creating book covers (Presentation). For the purposes of writing your novel, though, Docs is the Google product that should float your boat.

With Docs, you can create an unlimited number of separate documents, and Google allows you to organize them in any kind of folder structure you want. You can format your documents, save them to Word or PDF (or other file types), move them from folder to folder, recover previous versions, and much more. In some ways, Google Docs are more sophisticated than Word.

And it's all free if you have already signed ~~over your digital life~~ up for a Google account.

So what's the catch?

There really isn't one.

Sure, Google docs may not be quite as full-featured as the desktop version of Word, but it's closing the gap all the time.

Some people also worry that their work will be stolen if they store it online, particularly with a behemoth like Google. I think the whole privacy and piracy issue is overblown when it comes to authors — bigger problems for most of us include actually finishing our works and then finding people to *read* them. But data security is a legitimate concern overall, so by all means, watch your back out there.

Then there is the idea that your work might vanish if Google just “goes away” some morning. First of all, you should have multiple copies of your most important documents, anyway. It's called *backing things up* and is an essential life strategy in the 21st century.

Second, you're going to be publishing soon, right? Once you do that, you'll have automatic backups of your finished works on Amazon, Smashwords, Kobo, etc. That should buy you some security for the black day when Google vanishes.

Finally, Google is sticking around for awhile. Their business model is too profitable and their customer base is too big for them to just disappear. Even if Google did have to fold for some reason, you can bet the *Animal Farm* that there would be scores of other companies ready to swoop in and buy up their assets. That would include YOUR data and YOUR patronage. At the very least, the new King would give you a grace period to move your stuff off their servers before they started charging you for the privilege.

Scrivener: Labeling Scrivener as a mere word processor is an injustice along the line of calling Stephen Hawking “brainy.” Quite simply, Scrivener has completely transformed the way that many writers (including me) work.

There is not enough room here to extol all its virtues or *potential* virtues, but a quick list of features will give you a flavor of just how versatile and useful Scrivener can be:

- Hierarchical folder structure
- Drag-and-drop anything to anywhere in the manuscript
- Customizable templates
- Multiple views of your documents and manuscripts — Document, Corkboard, Outline
- Compiling to just about any format you can imagine, including .epub, .mobi, .pdf, .doc
- A vibrant and active community of users who love to tweak and share their tips

and tricks

The list goes on and on, and these features make Scrivener the favorite tool of authors all across the spectrum, from novelists to how-to scribes to bloggers to journal writers.

Probably my favorite feature from the list above is among the simplest: drag-and-drop. If you've never had the pleasure of being able to reorder your chapters with just a couple of clicks and swipes, you're in for a real treat.

There ARE a couple of downsides to Scrivener, though they should not be showstoppers for most authors.

First, Scrivener is not free. At \$40, it's not super expensive, but it might be a deterrent for those who still view their writing as a hobby.

Second, Scrivener is a desktop app, meaning you can't access it from the web. That architecture threatens to make Scrivener a dinosaur, and I usually would not even consider a product that I can't access from *anywhere*. The feature set is so rich, though, that I make an exception for Scrivener.

Third, Scrivener is not transferable from one platform to another. So, if you work on a PC some days and a Mac on others, then you will need to buy TWO versions of Scrivener, one for each platform. Again, this is cumbersome and (slightly) expensive for those of use who prefer mobility, but it's not enough of an obstacle to discourage me from using it.

The good news — beyond all that Scrivener can do for you — is that Literature and Latte is working on upgrades and recently released a version for iOS. I can't really imagine writing a novel on my tablet, but then again, I couldn't imagine *reading* a novel on a tablet just a few years ago, so who knows what I'll be doing in the future.

What I am sure about is that I'll be using Scrivener for most of my writing for the foreseeable future.

Can you write without Scrivener? Sure you can. I just don't know why any serious author would want to, at least at the time of this writing. Again, tomorrow is an unknown, and another product might make Scrivener obsolete by next year.

For now, for me, Scrivener is the champ by at least 50,000 words.

Google Docs would be my solid second choice.

Timer

It might seem strange to see a timer listed here among indispensable writing tools, but the truth is that all of life is governed by a timer of some sort.

You allow yourself 45 or 60 or 90 minutes to get to work every day. Your meetings have a 60-minute timer — the start of the next meeting — attached to them. Your life clock itself is counting down: maybe you have 80 years left, maybe 40, maybe 20, maybe less.

No matter what you do or how much you don't want to acknowledge it, we're all constrained by time *all* the time.

That may seem stifling, but we can use it to our advantage in our daily writing routines. We'll talk more about how a timer fits into your plans in the chapter on writing every day, but for now, here are some features your chronometer should have:

- Adjustable time periods
- Visual and aural alarms
- Support for multiple consecutive time periods
- Repeatable cycles of multiple time periods
- Easily accessible to your writing environment

You can find these features in a variety of forms and at multiple price levels. Some writers like to use an actual, physical kitchen timer. One of the most popular gadgets for this is the tomato timer, which is shaped like (yes) a tomato.

Since we live in the 21st Century, though, and since we'll be doing most of our work online or at least at a computer, I recommend going with a slightly more high-tech option.

My favorite timer at the moment is the one provided by MarinaraTimer.com, which meets all of the criteria above and is completely free.

But pick whichever timer you want, so long as you feel comfortable using it day after day, for at least a full month. Be aware, though, that there is a great chance the timer will become a regular part of your writing routine from now on, so don't be afraid to experiment in order to find the right fit.

For now, you're on the clock!

Distractions

It probably seems ridiculous that I have written an entire book— this one — about writing your novel **faster** only to list *distractions* as a key tool for finishing your novel this month. Won't distractions kill your progress? Normally, yes, and we'll talk about that more in the next chapter, but you do need some *strategic* distractions.

The reason for this will become more clear when we dive into your daily writing routine later on, but the basic explanation is that you will be working in short spurts of time punctuated by even briefer periods of “rest.”

The idea is that you write as hard and fast as possible for a set period of time, and then shift your focus to something else for five or 10 minutes before digging in again. In order to keep from getting dragged into something else and completely losing your focus, I recommend that you line up a smorgasbord of potential rest activities that you can use during these respites from your novel.

The possibilities are as limitless as story ideas, but here are several between-writing activities that work well for most people:

- Take a walk
- Stand up and stretch
- Do some push-ups or jumping jacks
- Read an article
- Read a chapter in a book
- Check your email (use extreme caution with this one)
- Check the news (be careful here, too)
- Adjust the music or podcast you're listening to
- Get some coffee or a snack
- Talk to your spouse/co-worker/child/pet
- Clean your office

Anything you can do for a few minutes to take your mind off your writing but that you can “turn off” again without too much trouble will work well.

Like a planned cheat day during a strict diet, knowing you have something “fun” lined up can help you whiz through your writing sprints with extra verve.

So pick your distractions, keep them close at hand, and use them to refresh your mind and body for the rigorous writing to come.

STEP 5: Set Up Your Environment

Creating the ideal writing environment is a personal matter and will be influenced by your lifestyle, your sense of aesthetics, and your ability to concentrate.

While some people can do all their “writing” through dictation during a lunchtime walk in Central Park, others will require the solitude of a mountain cabin to get any real work done (although if that’s the case, you might find this 30-day challenge to be a real struggle unless you take a month’s worth of vacation. Maybe better to work on your powers of concentration first).

So, while I can’t architect the perfect writing setup for everyone, I can walk you through *my* ideal setup. It’s the one I use most often — or at least whenever I can — and I think the basic elements work well for most writers.

For me, the perfect writing environment must have ...

A Small, Dark Space

I’m a computer programmer by trade, which means I’ve transformed myself into about 50% mole over the last couple of decades. A relatively small, relatively dark work area is almost magical for closing out distractions and helping me concentrate on the task at hand.

You don’t need to wall yourself up so tight that you can’t move or breathe, but a small, quiet room can do wonders for helping you stay on task. Big, open spaces provide too many opportunities for your mind to wander and don’t impart a sense of privacy. When you’re writing, you don’t want to feel like the whole world is watching your raw words pour out of your soul, so seclusion is important. I find an 8-foot-by-8-foot room to be about perfect, with a couple of feet either way working well, too.

A Door that Closes

You can have the perfectly sized office with fine-tuned lighting and with all of the other items on this list accounted for, but if you’re besieged by constant interruptions, you still won’t get much work done. Whenever possible, work in a space that allows you to physically shut out the rest of the world with a nice, solid door. Hang a sign on the outside when you’re writing that warns of the consequences should someone breach your work zone. Something along the lines of, “Dad at Write — Violators of this space will be chided mercilessly for minor grammatical gaffes” usually does the trick for me.

Climate Control

If possible, arrange for the temperature in your workspace to be controllable independent of the structure in which it's housed (your house, office building, etc.). If you're hot or cold, it will be difficult to concentrate fully on your writing, so use space heaters, thermostats, blankets, fans, or air conditioning registers to make yourself as comfortable as possible.

Delicious Beverage

Taking a page from fellow Hoosier David Letterman, everything in life goes better with a delicious beverage. I fit the typical trope and usually work with a tumbler of coffee close at hand, but tea, the occasional soda, ice water, and other concoctions find their way to my desk, too.

Drinking a beverage, and especially sipping a *hot* beverage, encourages me to focus my thoughts and savor the golden moments of the day when I get to write, much as I savor each sip. Sounds corny, but it works.

Drinking water-based liquids throughout the day also keeps you hydrated, a key to staying energized and productive.

I'm a total teetotaler, but of course some famous writers have expanded their liquid repertoire to include more, ahem, exotic beverages. *cough* Hemingway *cough*

Nosh

Some writers like to snack while they work.

I don't nosh for noshing's sake, but intensive writing does make me hungry, so I will occasionally crack open a protein bar.

Snacking is a personal choice. It can keep your mouth busy and help you pass the time and may fit into that "savor the moment" mode I mentioned above. You have to be careful, though, since writing is a largely sedentary activity. You want to come out of this experience with 50,000 new words, not 50,000 new words *and* 10 more pounds on your hips or belly.

A Comfortable Chair

There's no way around it: writing a novel takes a lot of butt-in-chair time.

So you might as well make sure that chair is as comfortable as possible. You can read all about the [ergonomics of a proper chair](#), but some basics to keep in mind:

- The seat bottom should be soft enough to pad your tailbone and not so soft that you sink into it.

- The chair back should provide support in the lumbar region but not be noticeable (obtrusive) in doing so.
- The chair back should “give” a little when you lean back, but not so much that it becomes a recliner.
- Casters should roll freely over the floor surface. They should also have the option of locking into place.
- If the chair has arms, they should be slightly padded and rise to the level of your elbows when you’re typing.
- The chair height should be such that your knees are bent at a 90-degree angle when your feet are flat on the floor AND your elbows are slightly above your wrists when you type.
- The chair should swivel but not be “loose.”
- All of this should be adjustable to suit your body type and preferences.

If you have special orthopedic needs, you’ll want to take those into consideration, too.

One last note on chair ...

I’m a big fan of standing while you work, so that could be an option, too, if you have a desk that allows it. For me, though, most of my best standing work centers around analytical tasks like flowcharting, writing and debugging software, and putting together technical presentations.

When I want to *write*, sitting is usually my mode of preference.

A Spacious Desk

Whether you sit, stand, kneel, or hop up and down while you write, you need a place to do it. Most of the time, that means a desk where you can rest your laptop or keyboard.

For maximum comfort and productivity, your desk should be large enough to accommodate the following baubles with a minimum of clutter:

- Keyboard or laptop computer and mouse
- Large monitor, or two monitors
- Speakers
- Lamp
- Work space for writing notes *by hand*
- Open space for beverages and snacks
- Office supplies — pens/pencils, paper clips, stapler, etc.

If your life is 100% digital, you may not need all these items, particularly the office

supplies and space for writing physical notes.

You may also be able to make some substitutions, like trading headphones for the real estate taken up by speakers. I prefer to have both options.

Whatever equipment you decide you need, make sure you have plenty of space for it on your desk so that you're not fumbling around or cleaning up messes when you should be creating.

An Uncluttered Desk

And whatever you do, keep your workspace clean and uncluttered.

OK, this is a personal preference and an outcropping of my uptight personality, but I really do think an orderly work area will benefit most writers.

Chugging out 50,000 words in 30 days requires a regimented approach (in most cases), and it's tough to be disciplined if your desk is a sty and you spend 10 minutes ever writing session just getting to your keyboard. The same goes for your computer desktop and file structure. Keep it clean and uncluttered, and you'll be able to dive in at a moment's notice.

It doesn't take much work to stay clean, either. Simply start with a nice, tidy workspace and then, as your mother told you, put away your toys at the end of each session.

Music

Some people work do their best work in absolute silence. If that's the case for you, then you just need to make sure that your writing sanctuary is as quiet as possible.

Many (most?) writers, though, can benefit from some sort of background noise. White noise is a good choice for some, and there are several online sources you can use to fend off the deafening silence or close out ambient noise that might distract you.

Another great option to consider as writing fuel is music.

Some writers find *any* kind of music distracting, but there is [research](#) that shows certain types of music can aid the creative process and may help you write faster and better. Usually it's classical or jazz music that gets the nod in these studies, but art is subjective and it "hits" us all in different ways.

My advice would be to try out different types of music while you're writing to see which one(s) gets you in the "zone" fastest and most completely. You have nothing to

lose except a few seconds while you channel hop.

Maybe you'll find that you work best in silence, but music is a Godsend for thousands of writers and is likely worth a shot.

A Fast Computer

You could argue that a computer belongs on the list of tools rather than here in the writing environment section, but I don't think so.

Unless you're really old-school and do your writing either by hand or using a typewriter, or you dictate your novel, then you are going to be glued to a computer keyboard and screen for 50-100 hours during the month you're creating your masterpiece.

That's a huge commitment, and your machine can become a best friend or a debilitating foe. You need to make sure you can live with that other "person" in your life if you want to achieve your goals.

Nothing saps your enthusiasm and energy faster than a sluggish computer or hard-to-use programs that you struggle to navigate. With that in mind, here are some factors that you need to consider when getting your computer ready for the rigors of fast novel-writing:

- Do you prefer the Windows or Mac environment?
- Is your machine responsive to your typing, or is it too slow to keep up with you?
- Can your computer run the programs you want to use?
- Is your keyboard comfortable to use, or does it cause pain?
- Is your monitor big enough that you avoid eye strain when working for extended periods?
- Is your Internet connection fast enough to support any research you need to do without causing frustration.

If some of these items fall short of your needs, look for opportunities to improve before you get started on your book. While it can be expensive to "fix" some problems, you can work on others basically for free.

For instance, if your computer is slow, run a virus scan and remove any programs that might be causing performance issues *and* might also represent a security issue. Similarly, look through the programs that you have installed over the years and remove any you don't need that might be running in the background and eating system resources.

Clean up your hard disk.

Clean up your *desktop* so it's easier to find what you need.

In general, make sure your computer is as healthy as it can be. There are plenty of resources available on the net to help you with this, such as PCMag.com. Use them.

Similarly, look for ways to improve your Internet speed. That may seem impossible, but you can do subtle things to help out:

- Ask others in the house to stay off the net during times when you need to do heavy duty research.
- Concentrate on one task at a time — don't do research while you're streaming *Game of Thrones*.
- If possible, avoid times that coincide with peak general Internet usage.

Of course, you can always just scrap what you have now and buy bigger, faster, more user-friendly equipment. That's not generally a great strategy for average folks, though, who have bills to pay and family obligations — especially not when you can use a little electronic elbow grease to squeeze more out of what you already have.

However you go about it, you need to make sure your computer is as usable and non-frustrating as possible. After all, it's going to be among your best friends over the next month.

STEP 6: Outline Your Book

Are you a plotter or a pantser?

Those are the two basic camps when it comes to writing a novel, or any other work of prose, really.

In general, plotters begin with a plot (surprise) and then plan out the details of their novel *before* beginning to write. The depth and scope of this planning varies by author and by project, but the gist is that plotters want to have a structure around which to write.

By contrast, pantsers ... well, they write by the seat of their pants. Hence the name.

Pantsers may start with a plot in mind, or they may begin with nothing more than a fuzzy notion of a character or setting. Then they sit down and let their characters guide *them* through the story. In the end, their novel is an organic work of art shaped by their moods and the inspirations of the individual writing sessions that went into completing the work.

So which is better, plotting or pantsing?

The answer, probably, is that neither is *better* but that one or the other may fit your current situation more closely than the other.

I have written stories using both methods, and have had success — in terms of producing cohesive prose — with both. I've done some of my best creative writing when I just sit down with an idea and let my fingers fly, for instance.

But the logistics of NaNoWriMo make a big difference in the approach I take to quick novel writing. If you just want to crank out 50,000 words in 30 days and claim victory, you can use almost any method to get that job done. That's fine, and you can pursue that path if you want.

The *real* point of NaNoWriMo, though, is to produce the first draft of a true novel that has a cohesive plot and makes sense from a reader's standpoint. It should have a beginning, middle, and end, and the scenes should flow logically from one to the next as you move through the book. It also should develop characters to an appropriate degree, and there should be a conflict (or two) that is either resolved or pushed to the edge of a cliff by book's end.

It should be, you know, a *novel*.

Now, you won't get much beyond the rough-draft stage, especially your first time through this process, but that draft should be as complete as possible and leave you with a big lump of clay that you can later edit and mold into the final story you want it to be.

To progress from nebulous idea to a mostly-baked novel of 50,000 words or more in the span of 30 days won't happen by accident for most of us. Sure, Stephen King famously follows his characters' leads and STILL produces more compelling prose in a year than most of us will in our lifetimes, but that's not a realistic model for the majority of authors. Emulating King's style in the hopes of matching his production is folly for the "average" writer.

It just doesn't work unless you have the same kind of brain as King, and those are hard to come by.

That's why, for the purposes of this challenge, I use a hybrid model that leans more heavily on structure than on blind alleys, but which also leaves room for improvisation. I call it "planned pantsing," which is a term I first heard from the guys at [Sterling and Stone](#).

The plan all starts with outlining the plot of your book.

Painless Outlining

When most people hear the word "outline," we flash back to the horrors of high school English class and cranky old Mrs. Stimpson back in Junior year. The context was usually preparation for a term paper. We remember the pages and pages of multi-indented discussion points punctuated with capital and small Roman numerals, Arabic numerals, letters of all sorts, and a dizzying array of bracket types. We remember getting dinged for phrases in the same sub-groupings that weren't quite parallel, and we clearly recall having that one dangling sub-sub-sub-point that didn't have a match no matter how hard we twisted our ideas or source material.

"If you have only one item in a level, then either your research is incomplete or your structure is flawed," Mrs. Stimpson told us for the umpteenth time on the eve of our outline's due date.

Ugh.

The interesting thing is that Mrs. Stimpson was onto something when she had us outline our papers beforehand. It probably got lost amid all the hand-wringing over

details, the arguing over why we were wasting our time, and the tears we shed late at night wondering if it was ever going to end, but that finished outline made the actual writing easier for most of us.

Or at least it should have.

And that's the point of an outline when you're planning your novel, too. The good news is that you don't have to follow any rules when you're creating your own outline, and it doesn't have to be torturous. In fact, if you do it right, creating an outline can be invigorating.

Best of all, it will help you solidify your story and make your novel much better in the end.

So, are you ready to get going with a simple exercise that will help make your novel the best it can be AND put you on the road to finishing your first draft in 30 days?

Here are the simple steps for creating your own compelling outline.

1. Begin by writing out your **basic plot** in a paragraph or two. What's the big idea, what major actions will drive the story, and how will it conclude? You're not committing to anything concrete at this point, but you should at least have an idea of where you're going. Write it down in a couple hundred words *at most*, and you'll have your destination. The rest of the steps here will be your map for getting there.
2. Start a numbered list and write down the **structure points** of your book, one per numbered bullet. So, if you're following the seven-point scaffold, your list will look like this:
 - 1) Hook
 - 2) First Plot Point
 - 3) Pinch Point 1
 - 4) Mid-Point
 - 5) Pinch Point 2
 - 6) Second Plot Point
 - 7) Resolution
3. Now, read your blurb and think about what will be happening in your story during each of these parts. How will you hook the reader? What will your protagonist's turning point be? How will you resolve the story? Under each story point, start writing down these **main ideas** as sub-elements, but be sure to keep them at a

high level. Include just enough detail that you can read down your list and get a flavor for the story you have in your mind.

4. Take another pass through the outline you developed in step 3 and try to break down each point into a fairly cohesive unit. Think about how you would begin **each part** of the story, and how it would end. Is there a clear arc defined by each bullet point, or are they muddled? Anywhere you find multiple natural stop and start points, break down the idea into two or more mini-themes and put them in rough chronological order. When you're done with this step, you should have the list of main ideas that will drive your plot — these will be your **chapters**.

5. The End

This is such a simple process that you may wonder why you should bother creating an outline at all. Well, there are at least two big reasons that this is an invaluable step in preparing for your novel.

For starters, this will be the first time (usually) that you move your entire story arc out of your mind and onto paper or into bits and bytes. If you're anything like me, you have all these great novel ideas floating around in your head, and they look epic looping against your internal movie screen. But when I sit down to translate that vision to the real world of books, I usually realize that I only have bits and pieces worked out, usually the the hook or first plot point and the resolution. How do I get from the beginning to the end?

I have no clue in the early days, generally speaking.

But by taking the time to iterate through this outline process, I start filling in the pieces the way images loaded to your browser in the early days of dial-up Internet — chunk by chunk, pixel by pixel.

And *how much* time should you spend on building this type of outline? It's going to vary based on the story you're writing, how much experience you have, how picky you are, and just how developed the story is in your mind. Once you get started, the temptation for some will be to dig deeper and deeper, adding multiple levels of bullet points, maybe even reverting to Romans and caps and smalls and brackets and all sorts of minutiae.

But you don't need all that, at least not for pushing out your first draft. Stick to two levels — story structure points and the chapters within — and you'll be ready to roll. If you do that, your entire outlining process should take no more than an hour, tops.

So, that's the first benefit: filling in your story arc in less than an hour.

The second benefit of creating a simple outline of your novel is that it sets you up perfectly to create story beats, which are arguably the biggest time saver going when it comes to writing a novel fast.

STEP 7: Write Story Beats

Story beats are another construct that I first learned about from the guys at SterlingAndStone.net (sensing a theme here?). A story beat is just a quick synopsis of a part of your novel, written beforehand and intended to guide you when you sit down to work for *real*.

You can approach beats in a few different ways, but here is the procedure I use most often:

- Create a folder for each part of your story structure. If you're using Google Docs, then under your book's folder you'll have a "Hook" folder, a "Plot Point 1" folder, etc., for the 7-point story structure. Same thing with a Scrivener project.
- In each folder, create a blank document for each chapter in that section from your outline, named appropriately (chapter name, chapter theme, keywords).
- In each document, list out the key points for the chapter that you're going to write. I usually write a full-prose paragraph or two that synthesizes the sub-arc for that particular chapter, though you can use bullet points here, too. You want to include enough detail to maintain the mood and theme of your story and keep it moving forward but not so much that you lock yourself into a rigid micro structure. You also don't want to spend a lot of time here — five to ten minutes and 100 to 300 words is about the norm for my own beats.

And that's all there is to writing basic beats for your novel.

The Sterling and Stone group have evolved their use of beats into an art form and an assembly line of sorts, but their goals are different from yours and mine when we're embarking on NaNoWriMo each year. While we're looking to finish a *first draft* of our novel in a month, they're building a business around heavy collaboration. Their methods must allow the three of them to write a great novel in the shortest amount of time possible while also granting individuals some creative freedom and still driving toward a finished story that is marketable and complete.

As a result, their beats have grown into short stories or mini novels that can sometimes span 1000s of words each. This obviously works great for their setup but is probably overkill for us. But certainly, feel free to experiment and iterate toward your ideal form of story beats.

Keep in mind, though, that for an individual author, the idea of story beats is to help you rekindle the overall theme of your book whenever you step into a certain chapter. They also provide a scaffold for you to build around, giving you the freedom to fill in details and meander without fear of straying too far from your theme.

An easy way to check your progress in terms of staying true to your vision is to read your beat, write that chapter, then re-read the beat. Does your beat now serve as an apt synopsis for the chapter you just wrote?

If so, you're done with that part of the book — for now.

If not, then you'll want to figure out where the disconnect is. Did your chapter go astray, or was your beat not quite right to start with? Or maybe your full chapter has taken your story arc in a new direction that you want to follow. If so, you might want to revisit your subsequent beats and revise them accordingly.

The beauty of beats is that they take away all the angst about *what* you're going to write in each session. Think of them as writing prompts that you've sprinkled throughout your book for the future you who will be creating your “finished” product.

Inspiration is a tricky beast, but story beats can help make it a certainty when you're writing your novel.

STEP 8: Schedule Your Writing

Writing schedules are a controversial topic among authors, but one you need to address if you have any hopes of finishing your novel this November and your *next* novel before the decade is done.

There are two basic approaches to just *when* you should write: when inspiration strikes or on a set schedule.

The “inspiration” group will tell you that you can’t force art and your true voice can only be found when it reveals itself with no coaxing. You can force yourself to write at a certain time, but if you’re not in the flow, your words will be stilted and awkward at best, and a complete fraud at worst.

Or they won’t come at all.

There *MAY* be some merit to that argument if you’re an established master working on your next opus and you don’t hold down a regular job. If you’re a legend with an exalted body of work on which to stand, by all means wait for the lightning bolt to hit you again before releasing more of your goodness into the world.

Not many of those magical creatures exist, though.

The rest of us need to find ways to wrestle our stories from the pit of our brains and drag them clawing and cursing through our arms and fingertips so we can spit them out on the screen. If we wait for inspiration before we write, we may *never* write another word — too tired from work, too busy with the kids, too engrossed in *Fargo*, too ... lazy.

Worse, inspiration may strike when we can’t do anything about it. What if you’re in the middle of an important business meeting and you get the urge to write a chapter in your novel after three straight weeks of writer’s block? You’re hosed, that’s what, and you miss your golden opportunity to move forward.

Oh, well, there’s always next month.

I don’t mean to be flippant about the need for inspiration, because muse is important for every writer. We *all* have stories that demand to be told, or else we wouldn’t be writing fiction in the first place, and all of those tales were inspired by something, at some point in time.

But most of us need to coax or coerce our words out of hiding even when they don't feel like playing. And when you're in the throes of busting out your novel in 30 days or facing any other deadline, there is no way you can write only when you feel like it.

No, when you're faced with churning out 2000 words a day or *losing*, you have to take control of your mind, your muse, and your writing. You need to **schedule** your work on a daily basis.

How to Schedule Your Writing

I can hear your protests transmitted across the wire and back through space and time to my office as I write this: "But I don't have any extra time in my schedule!".

If that's really true, then you need to forget about writing your book for now. Get your house in order first, get a handle on your time, and then come back for another go next year.

Most of the time, though, when we *think* we don't have much or ANY extra time, we're just not looking in the right places. Or we're adopting an all-or-nothing mentality that can stop writing progress cold.

Almost everyone has "hidden" pockets of time that can be used for writing. Your job is to identify them, schedule them, and use them.

Your three steps to "found" time are:

1. Identify Your Available Time Blocks

To start, open your calendar for November. This works best with an electronic setup like Google Calendar, but you can use a paper version if you like. If you don't already use a calendar of some sort to schedule your days, now is the time to begin.

If you're like most busy people, you probably have several entries in your November already — business meetings, medical appointments, school activities, birthdays. That should still leave plenty of whitespace on your calendar, and that's where you're going to make hay as a writer.

If you have a job, go ahead and block off the days and hours that you'll be at work, but leave your lunch hours and any breaks open.

If you're in the US and celebrate Thanksgiving, you can probably mark off that Thursday. Maybe Black Friday, too.

Volunteer at the library or pet shelter on Saturday mornings? Those hours are gone.

What are your normal sleeping hours? Block them out.

Church on Sunday? Gone.

Dinner with your best friend every Wednesday? Reserve that time, but make a note to come back to it later. Maybe mark it with “TK” if you want to feel like a writer.

You get the point — anything that you **MUST** do or will not give up has to go on your calendar. Each one represents a block of time that you can’t use for writing.

Got everything filled in? Great, now take a look at your schedule again, but focus on the open whitespace this time.

Is your calendar completely blocked out, or are there gaps that you could use for writing? Unless you work three jobs or run your own business or a small nation, the answer is obvious: you have some time left over after all of your have-to-dos each week.

Now, the question is, what do you normally do during all of those open time slots? Many of us have free time in the evenings that we fill with television. Some of us spend time on hobbies or working out. And how about commuting? Did you account for that?

And are some of those claimed time blocks really untouchable? Could you maybe write while you eat lunch, for example (if you didn’t leave that open as suggested)?

Take another pass or two through your calendar and add anything you might not have thought about the first time through. Make tough decisions about what is necessary to keep and what is just eating time you could be using in another way ... like writing.

2. Identify Your *Writing* Time Blocks

If you’ve followed the steps above, then I can guarantee that you have some open spaces in your calendar. But which of them represent real writing opportunities and which are just filler that you’ll have to kill?

I mean, what can you do with that 15-minute block at work that you normally use as a morning sanity break? You know, the one where you walk to the bathroom, then back to your desk, then to the break room for some coffee, topped off with a stop by a co-worker’s desk for some idle chitchat.

Before you answer that question, let’s consider some basic math.

The average person can type 35-40 words in a minute. So, if we’re being pessimistic,

let's say your number is closer to 30. Over a 15-minute stretch, that pace would net you 450 words.

Ah, but you'd have to do some setup and teardown, right? So maybe you'd only have 10 minutes to work. That drops you down to 300 words—not a massive accomplishment. But stretch that out over a five-day work week, and you're up to 1500 words. Do that for a year straight, and you've written enough to fill a 75,000-word novel.

Of course, you might not relish the idea of putting your job in jeopardy by working on your novel at your desk. So that 15-minute break is off the table, right?

Not so fast, Excuse Me!

How about you pull out that slick little supercomputer you carry with you all the time, download a dictation app, and do some “writing” while you walk around during your break?

This is an option that I hadn't considered until this year, but dictation has been a real eye-opener.

Here's why ...

The average American speaks between 110 and 150 words per minute at a conversational pace. If you build in some time for “ums” and “ahs” and allow a pause here and there for thought, you're probably still at 100 words per minute. Keep that up for 10 or 15 minutes, and you've cranked out 1000 to 1500 words.

Do THAT five days a week, and you have 5000 to 7500 words.

Over the course of a year, that translates to between 250,000 and 375,000 words!

Now *that* would make you one productive writer.

All of this is not to say that you *must* write during your breaks at work or that every free block on your calendar has to be devoted to writing. But you also shouldn't overlook any free time just because you think it's insignificant in length or presents logistical challenges.

As we've seen, an extra 15 minutes a day can make a tremendous difference. If you can identify three or four of these pockets every day, then you've found author's gold.

In case you're still not convinced that you have time available to write, here are a few

ideas for slots that most people can devote to their craft:

- Get up 15 minutes early and enjoy the quiet before the rest of your family wakes.
- Arrive at work half an hour before the rest of the crew and write — or dictate — as much as you can.
- Find a quiet place at lunch and write while you eat.
- Take a few five-minute walks throughout the day, dictating your story as you go along.
- Jot down notes or dictate (again) while you're in line waiting for you kids at school or soccer practice.
- Turn off the TV early and have a family book night — everyone else can read theirs while you write yours.
- Stay up late and work while everyone else is asleep.

And these are just *some* examples from my schedule. Take a look at your calendar, and I'll bet you can find even more writing nooks.

If you can snag just one of these “hidden” opportunities every day, you won't have much trouble finishing your book. If you can take advantage of two or more, you'll win the November challenge before that first nibble of pumpkin pie slivers down your throat.

3. Claim Your Writing Blocks

The final step in making sure that you have time to write every day is to actually stake a claim to those calendar slots that you identified above. You don't have to dedicate *all* of them to writing, but you have to grab at least one every single day.

So open up your calendar again — Google in my case — and look through the time blocks that are still blank for November. Starting on the first of the month and continuing through the 30th, reserve one time slot each day by scheduling a meeting, just like you'd do with business colleagues. Nab 15-minute chunks if you want, but keep in mind that you'll have to write nearly 2000 words a day, so bigger time blocks will get you there faster.

Once you've gone through the entire month once, go back to the first and add a second slot for each day. Repeat for a third or fourth or fifth time — however many you need to feel comfortable that you will have enough time during the month to write your 50,000 words.

If you can find a time that works every day of the month, you can make this process a lot easier by creating one recurring event that carries throughout November. Early morning and late night tend to work well for this sort of entry, but that's really going to depend on your schedule and preferences.

You can call these calendar entries anything you want — Writing, Novel, NoneOfYourBusiness. Just make sure that your time shows up as “busy” so no one can schedule over your sacred writing time without raising a conflict with their own meeting invites.

It’s not too hard to find and claim these time blocks if you’re honest and creative with your current schedule, but the next step is a bit tougher for some folks. In order to ensure your accountability and availability down the line, you need to **tell people** about your writing “appointments” and make it clear that these time blocks are sacrosanct. If you put some work into vetting your schedule upfront, you should be able to take this step with little angst, but be prepared for some bristling. Especially with family, any “free” time when you’re not at the office or on the road tends to become goof-off or “honey do” time. That’s great and necessary for building healthy relationships, but you can’t let it interfere with your carefully planned writing schedule.

In short, your writing appointments are at least as important as any normal meeting on your daily schedule, and you must do everything you can to protect them. Do not let other people “borrow” this time, and don’t let them interrupt you .

Remember, you’ve got 30 days to write 50,000 words, and every second is precious in that quest. The “quick question” from Dave at work as you’re heading out for lunch and cleaning the bathroom grout can wait a while. You have knights to fly, ghosts to conjure, and worlds to build.

Anything “extra” will just have to wait until your writing appointment is over.

So, the last stage in *claiming* your writing time is having a plan for dealing with interruptions. This four-part setup should let you clear the decks for writing without straining your relationships:

a. Tell people about your plans and when your writing times will be.

Share your calendar with everyone who might be impacted and make it clear that ALL of the events on that calendar are important. Ask them to honor your writing time just as you would honor the time they’ve set aside for you to attend a meeting or help with homework.

b. Make yourself *unavailable* during your writing blocks. That means

turning off your phone(s), closing your email and web browsers, and disappearing from your usual line of sight. Use the private writing space you set up in the chapter on environment to your advantage to make it harder to interrupt you.

c. Learn to deflect interruptions. Even the best plans can be foiled by real

life, and writing is no different. There will be times when someone encroaches on your writing time, and how you respond will go a long way toward determining your overall word count on those days. Your first defense should always be to ask if the conversation can wait for awhile, until you're done with your *current* (writing) obligation. You might be surprised at how many people say yes. If you get a "no" then *you* must decide if there is a crisis that warrants sacking your writing efforts.

d. Follow up. When you are able to successfully deflect an "urgent" conversation during your writing time, be sure to follow up as promised after the fact. If you keep your word, people are more likely to give you your space in the future because they know they'll eventually get what they need from you.

Above all, remember that no one cares about your writing as much as you do. Like your physical fitness and diet, it is *your* responsibility to make sure your writing gets the attention it needs. Left to the wolves of daily life, your dream of writing a book will be eaten alive because there will always be "important" activities to fill your waking hours.

Get your schedule in order, find your ideal writing times, claim them, and make them important to you and those around you. Only then will you *know* that you have the time to reach your writing goals.

STEP 9: Write Every Day

Hopefully by now you've bought into the idea that you have to plan your novel if you want to make your 50,000-word goal and knock off your first draft in the next 30 days. Or, if you haven't *purchased* the idea outright, you're willing to borrow it long enough for a trial period — like for the next month.

But all the planning in the world won't get your novel written if you forsake the most important part of writing a book: ***writing the book***.

Most of us have a vision of what our lives will look like when we're *real* authors, and it's usually glamorous: book tours, interviews, working from home in your PJs, worldly travel, sacking your day job. Glamor is subjective.

While any and all of those things are possible for authors — although not **all** authors, maybe — *none* of them are possible if you don't actually write your book.

So now is the time to put your plan into action and get moving toward knocking off those 50,000 words. Here is how to do it, broken down into scenarios that consider how much time you have to write and how your writing space is set up.

30 Minutes or More

If you have 30 minutes or more of uninterrupted time to devote to your writing, then you can use a very powerful method of timeboxing to focus your efforts and squeeze out every last word you can. At its base, timeboxing consists of alternating “sprints” of 15-60 minutes of work (writing) followed by about 5-15 minutes of “rest.” Here is how it can work for authors:

1. Retreat to your writing sanctuary, the one you set up in the chapter on environment.
2. Get your working space ready — close the door, turn off your cell phone, fire up the laptop, open Scrivener (or Google Docs or Word or ...), etc.
3. Open the beat or unfinished chapter you're going to work on.
4. Open your list of “distractions” from the chapter on tools.
5. Set your timer for 25 minutes. If you're using an online tool like the Marinara Timer, you can go ahead and set up a second interval of 5 minutes for your rest period. Then set the two-period cycle to repeat indefinitely, and you're ready to go.
6. Start the timer.
7. Write.

8. Don't edit.
9. Write.
10. Don't stop typing.
11. Write.
12. Look away from the screen if you get tempted to edit.
13. Write.
14. Stare out the window as you create.
15. Write.
16. Turn off the screen to see if that helps you keep flying.
17. Write.
18. If you need to look something up -- DON'T! Instead, insert "TK" where you need some extra information and keep going. ("TK" is writerspeak for "to come.")
19. Write.
20. When the bell dings to tell you time's up, stop writing.
21. Pick something from your list of distractions and do that for five minutes—your rest period.
22. When the bell dings, start writing again.
23. Repeat steps 7 through 22 until you're out of time for writing or until you pass out from the euphoria of it all.

If you have just half an hour, then you can probably stand to write for the entire 30 minutes. Any longer than that without a break, and you're likely to get tired and distracted. Of course, stamina varies by individual, so check your owner's manual.

This is a simple procedure, but it's the crux of pounding out a lot of words in a short period of time. The combination of these types of "sprints" with free writing — burning through as many words as possible even if your muse is on vacation and without stopping to edit — is almost magical in overcoming writer's block and becoming a consistently productive author.

Less than 30 Minutes or Unconventional Settings

Any time you have less than 30 minutes available for writing, then you need to be even tighter with your actions. If possible, get your setup ready beforehand so that you can just sit and write for your fully allotted time.

For instance, if you're squeezing in 15 minutes of writing in the mornings before the rest of the family wakes up, spend five minutes the night before clearing your desk of distractions and queuing up your next writing task in Scrivener or Google. Then, when you get up, wipe the sleep from your eyes, shuffle to your desk, and let your fingers fly.

The same goes for writing that you do in an unconventional way.

If you dictate your story into your phone during a morning break, then have your voice-to-text app open and ready to go before you start your break.

If you write on the city bus, have your laptop in order and ready to hit the document you need when you open the lid in the morning. Keep your headphones close by and iTunes (or Pandora or a favorite CD) ready to play so that you can tune out distractions from the get-go.

Just because you are crunched for time doesn't mean you can't make the *most* of that time, and it certainly doesn't mean you can't write your novel in a month. Fifteen minutes here, 30 minutes there, and an occasional extended writing session will see your word count stack up more quickly than you might have imagined possible.

STEP 10: Monitor Your Progress

One of the biggest mistakes people make when trying to achieve any goal is failing to take stock of their **progress** on a regular basis.

Want to lose weight for the long haul? Then you need to reduce your calories by a little bit every day and weigh yourself once every week or two. If you're not losing, or not losing fast enough, then you have to adjust what you're doing.

Have a huge project to finish at work? Then you need to lay out the steps involved, assign "due dates" to them, and check your team's status every week (at least).

The same holds for writing a novel, particularly when your goal involves not just getting your story on "paper" but also hitting a specific word count.

Fortunately, the math involved in writing a NaNoWriMo-length book is simple: *in order to write 50,000 words in 30 days, you need to **average** 1667 words per day.*

Couple that requirement with your outline — whatever form that may take — and you have a set of powerful signposts to keep you moving forward throughout the month.

So, how do you make sure you're **on track** to finish your novel?

The first step is to set up some sort of word-tracking device and then write down the number of words you write each day, at the end of each day. Google Sheets is a great option for this because it's free, and you can easily create a column for dates and one for daily word count. When you finish writing for the day, just open the Google Sheet and plop down your word count.

(I have prepared a template that can help you out with this [here](#). Just let me know you want access and I'll add your email address, then you can copy [the template](#) and modify it as you like.)

Besides keeping track of your daily word tally, you also need to track your *overall* word count as the month dwindles. You can do this pretty easily in Google Sheets by adding a third column and using a simple formula to sum all of the daily counts up.

If you want a little more accountability, the NaNoWriMo website also lets you track your words on a daily basis. If you're writing your novel outside of November, you can use an online tool like the [Pacemaker Planner](#) instead. In addition, you can join a "team"

or post your progress to one of the threads in their forum, too.

What may be a bit tougher to track than simple word count is your progress toward creating a complete story. It's (relatively) easy to crank out 50,000 words of drivel, but your goal for this challenge is to produce a cohesive narrative, not just a string of random thoughts. To keep with the true spirit of writing a *complete* book, then, you need to make sure that you're knocking off your story points at the right times.

The most straightforward way to do this is to estimate, *upfront*, how many words each chapter of your novel will contain. Then schedule not just your writing *time* each day, but the specific parts of your novel that you'll be writing on any given day.

You might even go so far as to record the chapter names or numbers in your calendar on the days you plan to work on them.

You can do the same thing with the Google Sheet that you're using to track word counts — add a fourth column and type in the chapters you plan to work on each day.

Whatever method you use, it is imperative that you do *something* to monitor how you're progressing in your novel. Part of that monitoring should be to review your status every day of the month and then make adjustments if you fall behind.

What kinds of adjustments?

Glad you asked ...

STEP 11: Adjust as Necessary

Tracking your progress can be motivating any time you have a goal to reach in a short period of time.

But the real value of progress-tracking is that it allows you to spot problems early on and make the **adjustments** necessary to get you back on schedule and, ultimately, hit your target.

An example here should help solidify what kinds of adjustments you can make while crafting your book.

Let's say you start writing your novel on November 1 with the goal of taking the entire month to write 50,000 words and completing your story. That means you need to write an average of 1667 words per day for 30 days in order to "win" the challenge.

You start off well and knock out 2000 words on each of November 1 and November 2, leaving you with just 46,000 words to write in 28 days. You'll have to average about 1643 words per day to make that happen, but you decide not to revise your daily goal since you know that crap happens sometimes.

November 3 is a busy day at work, but you manage to log 1660 words, just short of your initial daily goal.

But all heck breaks loose on November 4: you have a flat tire on the way to work, forget to bring your lunch, spend all evening at your son's peewee basketball practice, and THEN come home to a clogged toilet. Life wins, and you write zero words.

You spend most of the day on November 5 trying to catch up at work and home from the calamities of the day before, and you turn in another goose egg.

Finally, on November 6, you're starting to feel human again, but you've lost some of your writing groove and only manage to crank out 1000 words.

If you've done the math, you'll realize that you have now written 6660 words in the first six days of November, or 1110 per day. That's pretty far below your daily target and leaves you 3400 words behind the 10,000 you *should* have written by this time.

Now, you have a few options at this point: you could give up because the deficit is insurmountable; you could try to tackle 5000 words on November 7 to get caught up; or

you could spread the load out over the remaining 24 days of the month.

For most people, that last option will be the most palatable ... quitting sucks, and writing 5000+ words in one day sucks only slightly less.

As November 7 looms, you stand 43,340 words short of a completed novel with 24 days left in the month. Simple arithmetic comes to the rescue once again and tells you that, from this day until month's end, you need to write 1806 words per day. That's a daunting total, to be sure, but it's only 139 more than you had *planned* to write each day when you began the project, and you decide it's worth the extra effort if it will help you achieve one of your life's goals.

That's a pretty simple example that you can also build into your Google Sheet simply by adding another couple of columns: Remaining Words, which will be 50,000 minus your running tally of total words written; and Remaining Words per Day, which is just the value in Remaining Words divided by the number of days left in your month.

Another illustration of how monitoring your progress is vitally important is the case where you're having little trouble meeting your word count but realize that your book is not moving toward completion as quickly as you might like. For instance, if you had planned 10 chapters, each roughly the same size as the others, then you should be working on each one for three days or so (5000 words per chapter/1667 words per day \approx 3 days per chapter).

If you notice that you have cranked out 6000 words by the end of Day 3 but are only halfway through your first chapter, then you have a dilemma, and you again have choices.

You *could* clip the content in your remaining chapters to make sure you finish the main plot of your book while writing at your current pace. With 27 days remaining in the month and writing at 2000 words per day, that would give you 54,000 words to wrap up the first chapter and squeeze in the other nine, which would end up averaging fewer words than your opening chapters.

You could also just continue to write at your current clip, finishing November with around 60,000 words but with maybe only six of your 10 chapters completed. NaNoWriMo *encourages* you to finish your novel, but the only "hard" rule is that you hit that 50,000-word target, and you would sail past that for the win. Of course, **you** would know that your story is not complete and you would also risk never coming back to finish the job.

The last option is the most daunting of all, but at least a possibility. Recognizing that

each of your chapters is going to run about 12,000 words, you could revise your overall word-count goal to a whopping 120,000 words. With 6000 already done, you now have 27 days to finish the remaining 114,000, which means you'd have to write more than 4200 words each and every day until the end of the month to hit both your word-count and story completion goals.

Is that possible or even worthwhile? Only you can decide that, but at least with accurate tracking, you'll know what options you have and can adjust your schedule and expectations to fit your situation.

To help you with this task, I have prepared [this handy-dandy Google Sheet](#) that does most or all of what we've discussed here. Just drop me your email (or go to the sheet and request access), and I'll open it up to you. Then you can copy, modify, and use it to suit your needs.

Conclusion

So there you have it: 11 simple steps to help you write your novel in 30 days.

Can you do it?

Honestly, the numbers are against you.

Millions of people want to write a novel, but only a small percentage ever succeed. The reasons range from a lack of time to a poorly defined story idea to self-doubt. Most of these problems and others can be overcome if you take a measured, **systematic approach** to your writing, and that's exactly what this book is all about.

Adding the sense of urgency that a 30-day time limit imparts makes the formula come to life.

NaNoWriMo has been a godsend to authors all around the world, but it's also been a source of anxiety for many thousands. After all, how can you possibly write a book in a month when you haven't managed to spit one out in the last 20, 30, 40, 50 years?

The answer, again, is to have a **plan**. As you've read here, that plan does not have to be complicated, and your planning doesn't have to take a lot of time. If you already have the basic idea for your novel ready to go, you can finish the setup steps outlined in this book in well under a day. Even if you're still searching for just the right theme, it shouldn't take you much longer than that to get ready for your quick-shot first draft.

So, what's it going to be? Are you finally going to get serious and bust out that debut novel that has been eating at your soul for the last decade? Or will you be one of the regretful masses who dies with your best fiction still locked in your brain?

It's your choice. It's your legacy.

If you decide to do it — if you decide to embrace the idea that you can write a novel in 30 days — I predict that you won't stop at one. NaNoWriMo is a fire-starter, and it's hard to extinguish that creative flame once it takes hold.

And if you're having trouble getting *started*, I'm confident these 11 steps will help you overcome the inertia of inaction and turn you into a perpetual motion writing machine.

So go ahead: **take that first step and COMMIT to writing your novel.**

What have you got to lose besides a few hundred blank pages?

Thank You!

I really appreciate your taking the time to read *How to Win NaNoWriMo*, and I wish you well in your writing endeavors.

If you liked this book, I hope you'll consider leaving a review and telling your friends about it.

Thanks again, and happy writing!
Adam Hughes

Appendix A: 11 Steps to Winning NaNoWriMo

11 Steps to Winning Writing Your Novel in 30 Days

In case you missed them somewhere in the preceding chapters, here are the 11 steps that will take you from zero (words) to completed first draft in 30 days flat:

1. Make the Commitment

Decide that you're finally going to write your novel, and that you're going to do it in 30 days. Write down your goals and TELL someone about your goals. Tell *many* someones about it.

2. Find Your Story

Weed through the story ideas you've been pondering and pick the one you really want to write and can commit to every day for the next 30 days.

3. Pick Your Structure

Find the story structure that best fits the arc you have in mind for your novel.

4. Pick Your Tools

Line up the implements that you will use to craft your book. Common writing tools include a word processor and a timer.

5. Set Up Your Environment

Decide where you will work on your novel, at least most of the time. Make sure it's comfortable and uncluttered, and that it provides easy access to everything you need for success.

6. Outline Your Book

Using the structure you picked above, break down your book into chapters, aiming for complete sub-themes that will ultimately span 1000-3000 words each.

7. Write Story Beats

For each chapter you laid out above, take a couple of minutes to write a beat — a 100-to-500-word paragraph that captures the essence of the chapter and connects your novel, point-to-point.

8. Schedule Your Writing

Analyze your calendar for the month and identify pockets of time each day that you can devote to writing. Schedule those time periods just like you would a meeting with

your boss, and don't be quick to dismiss small blocks. Even 15 minutes can make a big difference in your overall word count.

9. Write Every Day

No matter how much planning you put into your novel, you'll never finish it if you don't actually *write* on a regular basis. Your best bet is to make it part of your daily routine and then use techniques like timeboxing, free writing, and dictation to improve your writing productivity so you can hit your word-count goals consistently.

10. Monitor Your Progress

Check your word count and story progression each day to make sure that you're on track for hitting your goals. That means writing a 50,000-word (at least) first draft with a complete story arc in 30 days.

11. Adjust as Necessary

If you DO fall behind, modify your daily targets so you can still achieve your overall goal of 50,000 in a month. And if you see that your novel is going to stretch beyond 50,000 words, adjust your daily goals to make sure you can complete your story in a month. A [spreadsheet like this one](#) can help you track and adjust your goals.

Appendix B: Productivity Tips

Productivity Tips for Faster Writing

“**Productivity**” is a pretty sterile word when used in the context of the very warm and artsy realm of writing your novel. The book is your baby, after all, and you can’t rush creativity, right?

Maybe not, but you also can’t afford to waste time with this stuff. You’ll be dead soon, and your novel will die with you if you don’t get it out of your head and into the world. That’s what the 30-day challenge is all about: spitting out your novel in a reasonable amount of time and then moving on.

It’s what **this** book is about, too, and there are little tips and tricks tucked throughout to help you be the most productive writer you can be. I thought it would be worthwhile to collect the best of those into one handy list that you can reference at a glance. Here goes:

- Even small blocks of time spent writing can boost your word count significantly.
- Don’t edit *at all* while you’re writing.
- Use a timer to impart some urgency into your writing.
- Try no-look writing to see if it makes a difference in your speed.
- Dictate your story (rather than writing it).
- Turn off distractions when you write.
- Use writing “sprints” and *seek* distractions between the sprints.
- Tell people about your goals.
- Schedule your writing and don’t let anyone interrupt you.
- Work in a comfortable environment.
- Keep all your tools at your fingertips.
- Know what you’re going to write about each day.
- Use story beats to set you up for consistent achievement.
- Write more words than you have scheduled whenever possible.
- Write for longer than you planned whenever possible.
- Plan. At least some.
- Get to know TK ... use placeholders for research that you need to do. Stopping to look something up will only slow you down.

None of these ideas is magical on its own, but chain enough of them together for long enough — say, 30 days — and you’ll really have something ...like a completed first draft!

Appendix C: What Not to Do

What Not to Do

Throughout this book, I've given you a series of steps that will lead you directly from start to finish in your novel-writing journey. They're straightforward and simple, but they're not necessarily easy to implement. One of the challenges you will face is avoiding the activities that can derail you.

In that spirit, I've prepared this list of pitfalls that you need to watch out for during your 30 days and beyond.

Some are obvious, some are insidious, but all of them can kill your progress.

So, if you want to write your book as quickly as possible ...

Don't Edit

You're going to have the urge to stop and edit your work as you type, or at least at the end of every session.

Don't do it.

Seriously, just put down the keyboard/pen/dictation device and step away from your manuscript.

You're trying to get your novel spewed out onto the screen — finally, after all these years — and nothing will stop your progress colder than agonizing over word choice or backspacing to fix a typo every couple of words.

It's very easy to fool yourself into thinking that you're "working" when you edit as you go along, but the truth is, you're just wasting time until you have something TO edit. That's what you should aim for during this next month — just get your clay out on the table. You can sculpt it later.

Editing *after* your writing session or at a different time of the day is not a horrible idea, and it's what you'll end up doing as you write more and more books (and you will!). But especially for first-time novel writers, I would suggest leaving all kinds of edits for later days. Slicing and dicing won't help you reach your goal of finishing a rough draft of your novel in 30 days, and it likely will hurt you.

Get that manuscript out of your head and into the real world, then come back in December or January or next summer and edit your masterpiece.

Don't Read About Writing

This probably seems like pretty stupid advice right about now since I've asked you to read this book, *which is about writing*.

But by the time you've committed to this 30-day challenge and are in the throes of writing your novel, most advice on writing will be of little use to you. If you've followed the steps in this book, your prep work is done and you know what story you're going to write.

All that's left to do is to *write it*.

During the rest of the year, read all you want about writing. Learn every little bit to help you improve as an artist. Hone your craft.

But when you hunker down to get your book done, reading *more* about writing will only cost you time and confuse your efforts.

And related to this ...

Don't Surf, Browse, Tweet, Network, ...

The Internet is a miraculous advent in the course of human history. Never before have we been able to access information with such ease and immediacy, and never before have we been able, at the click of a few buttons, to “gather” with folks who are like us to commiserate, collaborate, or co-cogitate.

Forums, social media outlets, and blogs abound to help us accomplish everything from fixing that washing machine that won't start to figuring out where the semicolons belong in your short story (the horror!).

As wonderful as it is to have these resources available to us — all the time — the problem is that the Internet is the most effective Siren since, well, the original Sirens.

The Internet pulls at you like a lost love even when you're doing something else, something important, like writing your novel.

You know the routine, right?

You're plugging away at a passage in your book when you realize your protagonist has "walked through the door" five times in about 300 words. Time for a synonym or two.

Time for Thesaurus.com.

So you pop open a browser, and your homepage loads. Probably NOT Thesaurus.com.

Your journey could be derailed right there, depending on your Internet home.

If you have your homepage set to something innocuous like The Google, then you might make it to your destination.

If your browser opens to the news or ESPN or Facebook, for gosh sake, you're sunk. Inevitably, you'll get sucked into the abyss of political stories, baseball statistics, and cat videos.

Before you know it, your entire writing time block is shot, and you probably haven't even found the word you set out to find.

So, when it's time to write, turn off your phone, close your browsers, and tune out the world.

Nothing is more important in those precious minutes than the words you want to write on the page.

Don't Do Research

Related to the above point is research.

When you're writing fiction, you WILL run into passages where you're not sure of yourself.

Do football players wear cleats or spikes?

How tall was the average French man during Napoleon's reign?

What kind of gun do Racine city cops carry?

The answer to all of these questions is ... it doesn't matter.

Sure, these details are important, but only in your finished, polished, published novel.

Not when you're writing.

When you're pumping out words like Steph Curry draining threes, your Number 1 job is to keep that flow going. And nothing will kill it faster than stopping to look something up.

Instead, just write in "TK" — for "to come" — and keep going.

Your word count will thank you for it, and you can do all the research you want once your first draft is finished.

Don't Stop

Of all the things you need to NOT do when you're trying to write a novel in a month, this may be the most important.

Don't stop writing once you've started. If you lose your story line during a scheduled writing session, keep writing anyway. Put in some filler dialog, write back story, add some unnecessary details. While these bits might hit the cutting room floor during edits, keeping your mind and fingers moving will help you stay engaged in your tale.

Eventually, you'll pick up where you left off before your mental hurdle, because your mind will nudge you back where you should be. This technique — free writing — is also a great "cure" for writer's block in general.

Don't stop showing up every day. Fifty thousand words represent a whole lot of thinking and typing, and it's a big number. Even if you have a good first day, you'll wake up the next morning with a 48,000-word mountain staring you in the face.

Just keep going. Write your 1000 or 2000 or 5000 words on Day 2, then come back for Day 3. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

By the middle of the month, you'll have written more than 20,000 words, and your momentum will be unstoppable.

Don't give up on your dream. It's been said that 51 billion people want to write a book, but less than 10 of those will ever finish (slight exaggerations). You share that dream with all those people, or you wouldn't still be reading right now.

In the past, you had to start with tremendous writing talent, couple that with years of hard work, pick just the right genre and theme, catch the eye of an agent or publisher, and get extremely lucky to ever be able to call yourself a published author.

Today, at the dawn of the age of the eBook, anyone can publish their own book. All it takes is a little technical know-how, a computer with an Internet connection, and a book.

That last part is vital — you have to have a book. Your book won't materialize from thin air, but writing it is not an unattainable goal.

It just takes hard work, dedication, and enough belief in yourself to keep showing up, day after day, until your manuscript is done. There will be days when you doubt your talent, doubt your story, doubt the time you're "wasting" on your book — trust me, I've been there.

Do whatever you have to do to push those thoughts aside and get your butt in the chair every day. Get that book done.

I mean, what's the alternative?

You have a book burning a hole in your brain, and you can either write it or die — eventually — knowing that you had unfinished business. Your book will die with you.

Life is short for all of us, and we all have more stories than can be told in one lifetime. NOW is the time to push yours out and finally achieve your dream of writing a novel.

Thank You!

I really appreciate your taking the time to read *The 30-Day Novel*, and I wish you well in your writing endeavors.

If you liked this book, I hope you'll consider telling your friends about it. They can get their own copy [here](http://themoonlightingwriter.com/the-30-day-novel/) (<http://themoonlightingwriter.com/the-30-day-novel/>).

Thanks again, and happy writing!
Adam Hughes

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