

Strategy 6  
Structure Your Novel  
Story, Plot, and Architectonics

The previous chapter suggested that since a novel is built of scenes, one good way to give it shape is to draft, even extremely roughly, all the major scenes. If you can do this, you will have a possible roadmap for where the book is going- and a lot of material drafted. This is especially useful if you are the kind of novelist who writes character-driven stories. But, even if you came to your project with a strong story with lots of suspense and plot twists, you will still need those building blocks, the scenes, to hold up your book.

Let me tell you a story.

I once had a student with a brilliant concept for a novel. It was a book I would have loved to read. She had a wonderful mix of a family saga and colorful historical events that covered a century and was set in three nations. There were mysteries about the family and acts of great courage and great evil. She had letters from her own family that she could use, and she had done a lot of research. She knew the settings and the history and the languages of all the countries involved, and she had pages of chronologies and character sketches, and an outline with detailed summaries of each chapter.

The problem was that when she actually sat down to write, her drafted chapters were barely longer than her summaries. When her characters spoke, they conveyed information, but not life. They never took off in directions she hadn't planned. It was as if she had created the skeleton of a great skyscraper with no floors, no electricity, no walls. Perhaps a better image is of bones with no flesh. She had the structure, she had the plot, but she didn't have a novel. Please don't misunderstand. For the epic story she had conceived, she needed timelines and superstructure and planning. These are essential, and these are, in large part, what this chapter is about. But a novel is not a plan; a novel is not a line drawing to color in. A novel is made of words and

sentences, paragraphs and scenes that create and explore. It may be a fantasy world or a world created to teach a lesson, or it may be conceived strictly as an entertainment or a game, but it is a world, not a plan. A novel demands the participation of your full brain, all the parts of it, not just the logical one.

I find the story about the well-planned but unwritten book excruciatingly sad, partly because I felt I failed as a teacher to get the student really writing, and also because I wanted to read that novel! The student took classes, talked with friends, did everything possible to make her novel happen- but she could not write it. Maybe in the end it was the research and the thinking she loved rather than the storytelling or the play of words. I suppose such a person (and she had a full, successful life and career) might hire a ghost writer or use all the research for a nonfiction book or even a web page. Not writing a novel is not a catastrophe, but she did not create the thing she wanted.

The main reason I tell this story is to make the point that writing and planning are separate processes. An idea for a gripping terrorist plot or a passionate love story is not a novel. Nor, for that matter, conversely, is twenty pages of brilliant, evocative writing. Writing a novel demands learning to do many different things, although not necessarily all at once. You must sink into a story, imagine people and scenes and drama and places- and you must also make sure the book is going somewhere, that the prose has a rhythm- that an exciting scene is followed by something more contemplative, a short scene is followed by a longer one, a dialogue that sets up a clue is not forgotten.

Too rigid a structure can get in the way of the writing- but, conversely, you would be hard put to finish writing a novel if you didn't have any structure. What is needed is a flexible interaction between structure (whether you call it plot or story or something else) and the free flow of writing that may unexpectedly change the Plan. The best novels, in my opinion, are the product of a combination of spontaneity and strong form.

I like the word “architectonics” to describe these best novel

structures, especially in the beginning phases of writing. Poems have pre-existing forms to use or play against. Novelists need to create their own. They need architectonics- a fancy word for the science of architecture. It's about design and about how large things are supported. That's the part I like. How do you support three hundred manuscript pages? You don't do it with one surprise turn at the end, although that may be the best thing in your book. Nor is it enough to create a group of wonderful characters or some spot-on political humor or knock-out sex scenes or an incredible opening sentence. All of those can be high points of the novel, but they aren't enough for a novel. For something as large as a novel, for something that requires the sheer amount of time a novel takes to write, you need deep pilings- strong support. The trick is to remember that an initial sketch of a plan is not a blueprint. You don't want to make your structure so elaborate and rigid that it can't sway in the wind of new ideas.

But, you ask, aren't there some simple rules for making a compelling outline and shaping a novel? What about building suspense and the "arc of story" and "Freitag's Pyramid?" What about Classic Story Structure and the formulas that genres like romance and murder mysteries and thrillers use?

The answer is that, yes, these things exist, but, no, they are not enough on their own. You need a structure and a story, but the good news is that extreme originality is not required. Any of the genres can give you ideas, and you can borrow plots or structures from other novels. Two novels could have identical plots and yet one be a bore and one a masterpiece. In fact, many novels do have identical plots- boy and girl meet; boy and girl like each other a lot; obstacles arise; boy and girl overcome obstacles; more obstacles arrive: story ends happily with boy and girl together or unhappily with boy and girl separated forever. Cliché or powerful structure for a great novel? What makes the difference? It depends partly on the writer's skill, of course, but it also depends on the writer's engagement with the story. In other words, the best spy novels and romance novels don't just adhere to the rules of the

genre. The best novels, in my opinion, have a writer who has been deeply engaged with the story- has taken satisfaction and even joy in the writing. And an essential part of how you stay engaged, and move deeper, is when you feel a solid structure under you as you write.

To attain this structure, you don't depend on an outline. At the end of this chapter I describe how I use outlines, which I can say now is not at the beginning but toward the end of drafting. Whatever you learned in high school, and however useful an outline is for giving a speech or even writing a nonfiction book (I outlined heavily preparing to write this book, for example), it is not the best way to begin a novel. The danger is what happened to the diligent student above who was stymied after much elaborate research and planning. Yes, make notes, draw a map, make a one-page chronology- whatever helps you think through and remember your ideas, but stay loose. Regard all this as a sandbox where you are experimenting and playing. You need lots of left-brain reasoning in later drafts as you try to make sure that everything makes sense and works together; but in the beginning stages, your novel depends heavily on the unconscious, on something approaching a dream state for what is deepest and most alive in it.

One reason I love novel writing is that it calls up all of me- my memories, my reading and studying, my observations, my insights and logical thinking- as well as some mysterious depths and leaps that I couldn't analyze if I wanted to. What can be more fun than engaging all of yourself? The only part of me that isn't used sufficiently in novel writing is my gross motor skills, and I when I get stuck, I use those too: I go for a vigorous walk or run, and eight times out of ten, as my brain zones out, something useful pops up- rarely a direct answer to the problem I was obsessing about, but something- a new plot twist, the reason she did what she did, an image, a phrase. A gift from deep inside, transmitted through my body.

Some writers begin with a plot, say, an idea for an attack on the National Reserve and how it is thwarted. Other writers begin with situations- a family loses its mother and the father marries someone else.

Some writers begin with characters, or even a theory or idea, or, for that matter, with a beach house or a battered garbage can in an alley. Some novels take their structure from simply following a person's life story as if it was a biography. In general, the word "plot" is saved for the more complicated and carefully knotted up and unknotted sort of story line.

In all cases, however, the novel needs something to contain and shape the material. You need those deep pilings for support or large bins to contain what you're writing- and, not coincidentally, to suggest general directions for what you write next. One of my favorite novel architectonics is what is provided by seasons: I'm working on a young adult novel that is structured roughly as Spring, Summer, and Fall. I've drafted Spring pretty well, and I had originally planned to skip Summer and go straight to Fall so the main story centered around school, but then I came up with some ideas I really liked for Summer, so that took up extra time, and now I'm working again on Fall.

This sort of big container works best for flexibility. You can even use the absolutely simple Part I, Part II, Part III, and Part IV. Have I written all of Part I and Part IV but none of Parts II and III? Maybe the novel should have only two parts. Places work well too: Part I: New York City. Part II: Mogadishu. Part III: The Lake. This suggests that we will be ending up in a rural place. Does the closure of a return to the city, where we started, make more sense?

Many writers, especially those who tend to be character- or language-driven in their writing, will structure by giving each section to a point of view character: Faulkner names his sections in *The Sound and the Fury* by date, but each date has its own character and follows that character's mental processes. Jayne Anne Phillips's 2009 novel *Lark and Termite* uses dates- July 26, July 27, and July 28- but as you read, you find that the dates include July 26, 1950 as well as July 26, 1959. Subsections are named for places and people. I don't know, of course, at which point authors set up their Big Containers- the dates or names or places. Maybe they thought they were writing straight through in a linear fashion and then later began constructing and labeling the sections. I

suspect that there is usually interplay between writing scenes and passages and finding the structure.

What I'm suggesting, then, is some expansive bins to contain what you are writing as you begin to draft, and then, if you get a better idea, to partition the bins. You'll no doubt be shuffling things around a lot, especially if you are writing a character-driven novel. Later you can break it up into chapters, but in the beginning, organize your passages of writing by large categories and the scenes that belong there.

Exercise # 6-1: Experimentally, even playfully, come up with three to five divisions for your novel. If you've only written twenty two pages, there's all the more reason to start thinking a little about structure. You are not committed to this, but give it a try. Try seasons, years, names of characters, the weather, breeds of dogs, locations of major NASCAR races- anything you come up with.

There are, of course, other ways to think of structure. In theater, they use a simple figure called Freitag's Pyramid to visualize the action in a play. Draw a triangle with the apex off to the right. The apex, the high point, is labeled, not surprisingly, the climax- the big scene, the revelation, the battle, the moment he admits to himself that he loves her. On your sketched triangle, label the left side "exposition" or "inciting action" or "rising action." The French call this the *nouement* or knotting up. After the climax is the quick downward slide, the "falling action," the *dénouement* or untying. The idea is to see if you are building to something dramatic, and then finishing up promptly. Simple- probably too simple for a novel, although a lot of tales can be graphed this way. Think of Goldilocks and the Three Bears or Red Riding Hood.

A slightly different version of this, tailored more for novels, is as follows:

*Opening:* Scenes and/or exposition (narrative, setting up the world, the situation.)

*Conflict*: What the protagonist needs- what stands in the protagonist's way. Enemies? The protagonist's failings?  
*Development*: Attempts to resolve the conflict: scenes; exposition and narrative. This can go on for hundreds of pages.  
*Climax*: Resolution of the conflict  
*Dénouement*: Untying, unraveling, what else happens. In short stories, this part is usually almost nonexistent, but if a novel has a few subplots to unravel, this may take some time.

Many novels, perhaps most novels, have a number of rising and falling actions, a couple of climaxes, if only because they are so long. In screen writing they talk about "keeping the stakes high," which would suggest a series of climactic moments, each becoming a little more tense and important and thrilling than the one before. The flat lands become foothills which become mountains- and sheer cliffs for the grand finale.

You may actually want to try sketching out your novel along these lines. Anything that helps you envision your book is a good thing. What you always need, however, is a balance between the macro and the micro, between the grand scheme and the details of description and characterization and physical action.

Exercise # 6-2: Draw a Freitag's pyramid for your book. If you don't know how the novel is going to end yet, make up something. In other words, *pretend* you know the ending or *pretend* that your book has a structure. Do this as a hypothesis to test: does it look right for your novel? Does it give you some new ideas?

Exercise # 6-3: Try a sketch of your novel using the image of flat lands and foothills I suggested above. Sometimes this helps you figure out problems in your story. Is everything going along calmly and there is suddenly a huge crisis for no reason except that you felt it was time? Maybe you need some little foothill scenes in which the crisis is foreshadowed, where your main character begins to feel something is

wrong but not yet what it is...

Another idea for the big plan, a hypothetical structure for your novel to test out and see if it works, is my own invention, the Archipelago method of planning your novel. This is based on listing and writing a series of scenes as we did in exercises 5-10, 5-11, and 5-12 above, and then later filling in what is needed between them. An archipelago is a series of small islands in the ocean, not very far apart—actually, of course, they are the tips of an underwater mountain range. People who live on the islands often travel among them in ocean-going canoes or sailboats. The prehistoric Polynesians traveled great distances by taking off from one island of the archipelago then moving on the next one, and eventually, perhaps years later, striking out into the open ocean and eventually populating most of the islands in the Pacific Ocean.

For novel drafting, the idea is to draft all the scenes I've thought of for my novel so far. It might be five or it might be twenty-five. When I've drafted these scenes, I've usually used much of my initial writing energy. I've only, however, written the parts that really engage me. My advice is: never write the boring stuff. If it bores you, it will surely bore other people, and furthermore, if you get bogged down in writing things you feel are a chore, you may never get to the things you want to write. These drafted scenes become the tops of the underwater mountain range. Then, as you survey the scenes from your little islands, you will, with luck have more ideas for more islands and also for ways to cross from one island to the other, or some interesting sea creatures in the water itself. Perhaps in the end your novel will consist only of eighteen exciting scenes with jump cuts or white space between, and that will be the whole thing. At any rate, it's a great way to draft.

Exercise # 6-4: If you haven't done Exercises #5-10, #5-11, and #5-12, do them now!

The important thing here is to think of these as tools for thinking



about your novel as a whole, tools for planning, tools for running an experiment on a potential direction for your novel. These terms seem most useful to me if you try them out, fully expecting that you'll be changing your plan and rejecting what you've done so far.

#### Using Common Patterns in Novels

We've been focusing on drafting techniques and large structures. I like to see a lot of pages written, out of order or in order. Then, as you move along, you can elaborate on these structures and add more. For some novels, the story teller's voice may be enough to keep the threads of the plot in hand. A story, E.M. Forster famously said in *Aspects of the Novel*, a narrative of events in time sequence. A plot also narrates events, but the emphasis is on causality. Thus, 'The king died, and next the queen died,' is a story, but "the king died, and the queen died of grief," is a plot. If you write, "The queen died, and it was only later that we discovered it was because of grief over the death of the king," the plot now has a mystery. In other words, in a story, we ask, "And then?" In a plot, we ask, "Why?"

I love the contrast between asking "and then?" and asking "why?" Both of these questions can be used to move the writer forward in drafting and to guide the reader through the novel as well.

There are many common story lines and plot lines for novels. A number of them follow the pattern of biography or autobiography. In particular, many novels follow the pattern of the *Bildungsroman*, which is the novel of coming to adulthood. The *Bildungsroman* is one of the great novel structuring devices. The word is German for "formation" plus French for "novel." It is usually about the maturation of a young person, and it be psychological, moral, and/or intellectual. *David Copperfield* is a *Bildungsroman*, and a lot of other novels are at least part *Bildungsroman*, for example, *Jane Eyre*. It's a wonderful form that can be both simple and grand. The *Kunstlerroman* is a subcategory of *Bildungsroman* in which the person matures as an artist. Famous

examples include James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Willa Cather's *Song of the Lark*.

If you don't see your novel as a genre or a Bildungsroman, you might consider the following categories. Does your novel move:

1. from problem to solution?
2. from mystery to solution?
3. from conflict to peace?
4. from danger to safety?
5. from confusion to order?
6. from dilemma to decision?
7. from ignorance to knowledge?
8. from questions to answers?
9. from answers to questions?<sup>1</sup>

I am emphasizing here a kind of organic organizing in which the structure grows out of scenes and the drama inherent in them, but even after you've drafted a great deal, and know you are on your way with your story, you still may have questions and issues about how to organize what you have. You may find yourself saying, I'm not sure if I should end the novel with the suicide or start the novel with the suicide and then write the things that led up to it.

This is not a trivial question; it is, indeed the central question for how the reader comes into your books and moves through it. It is a question of what I call "Deep Revision," which is not about polishing and word choice, but about how to present the story it to a reader: how to guide your reader through an experience.

Some excellent novels begin with the end- the plot end, that is, and then spend a few hundred pages breaking down the reasons the thing happened. I just finished reading a novel by Joyce Carol Oates called

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<sup>1</sup> For more ideas like this see <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/content/2230/>

*Because It Is Bitter and Because It Is My Heart* that begins with a violent act and continues for several hundred pages with the consequences of that act in the lives of two young people.

I recently looked over some of my own novels to see how I organized them in these macro terms. My very first published novel, *A Space Apart*, had a multiple third-person point of view that followed five people for a chapter each, then another chapter for each of the five again. The novel was shaped generally around the twenty years or so a particular family lived in a particular town, and the question I was answering was, I believe, why did they ultimately leave or stay? I was mostly interested in the interplay of the personalities, the meaning of a nuclear family, the experience of that world, which was a version of the world I grew up in, but there was also this linear story of how they came to town and how they left. Another of my novels, *Oradell at Sea*, has a present time of an old lady on a cruise ship with sections about her as a young girl, poor, in a coal mining camp.

My second novel was the first of three in the same first-person voice, a young woman telling her story in typical *Bildungsroman* style. The first novel of the trilogy focuses on the high school years of the narrator, and then has a final section that is a high school reunion ten years later. The other two novels fall in time sequence between part 2 and part 3 of the first novel of the trilogy.

In some odd way, my first novel was my most *artful* in the sense of being carefully planned and balanced in advance. The trilogy started out as one book and kept expanding, and while it is far from strictly autobiographical, it roughly follows things that happened in my life, and uses current events as I experienced them. It was, at heart, an alternative version of my own life. It answered questions for me such as, What if I had acted on my passion for that boy? What if I had not been a writer always pulling back to analyze what I experienced? For a reader, it's a growing up story and a story about rural and urban experiences in a certain place and time.

In a novel, unlike in a short story, you probably have quite a few plot threads going. You are likely to have a main plot and subplots or even multiple main plots. Debbie Lee Wesselman uses metaphors to describe several types of multiplot novels<sup>2</sup>. Her first type is what she calls the “braid” where separate narratives alternate and wrap. Her example of this structural strategy is Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours*, in which three plot threads, widely separated in time and space, are held together by theme and story line. Her second type of multi-plot novel is the whirlpool in which a lot of different story lines funnel toward a single scene that unites everything. Her example here is Richard Russo’s *Empire Falls*, in which the several plots seem to unfold at a leisurely, even quiet pace, and then everything is sucked together at the end in a climactic action. This novel, unlike *The Hours*, is united by a place and time frame.

Wesselman also describes an hourglass structure in which two apparently separate plots come together and then diverge again, and a multi-plot structured like a bicycle wheel in which spokes extend from a fixed hub that is a single anchor of place and time from which the characters and their stories radiate into the past. Her final type of multi-plot novel is nesting dolls, in which various voices and frame stories enclose other voices and other stories. She suggests that the bicycle wheel and nesting dolls work well for heavily conceptual novels. “Above all, the structure should allow the reader a clearer path to understanding the writer’s vision, and, in doing so, should create a fictional world that resonates beyond the capability of a single plot.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Debbie Lee Wesselmann, “Structural Strategies for the Multiple-Plot Novel,” *The Writers’ Chronicle*, Volume 38, Number 5.

<sup>3</sup>Debbie Lee Wesselmann, “Structural Strategies for the Multiple-Plot Novel,” *The Writers’ Chronicle*, Volume 38, Number 5.

Exercise # 6-5: Here are some more questions to answer about your novel that might suggest strategies for organizing it:

- What is the time frame of your novel? How many days, months, years, does it cover?
- What setting is used most often, or is most important? Do we come back repeatedly to this one important setting?
- What is the most crucial scene?
- Who is the “Last Man Standing”? That is to say, which character has the final word, last insight- the point of view just before The End??

Exercise # 6-6: Below are some classic plot conflicts that are often used to describe novels. Which one, if any, fits your novel?

- Human being against nature. (This would be something like a person struggling in the wilderness, although in novels it is most often used in combination with some of the others below).
- Human being against Human being. (A lot of genre novels with a hero and the forces of evil fall in this category)
- Human being against himself or herself. (Typical for psychological novels)
- Human being against God or the gods or Fate or history. (Family sagas and historical novels often combine elements of this with others above)

Exercise # 6-7: Here are some classic plot outcomes. Which, if any, fit your novel? Does one suggest a way to end your novel?

- Protagonist gets what he or she wants.
- Protagonist does not get what he or she wants.
- Protagonist gets what he or she wants, but isn't happy.
- Protagonist does *not* get what he or she wants, but he or she *is* happy.

Exercise # 6-8: One more useful way to think of structuring your novel

is through the main character's wants. Answer these questions for your novel:

- What does the central character think he or she wants?
- What does the central character *really* want?
- What are the motives for wanting it?
- Where in the story do you show this? How? Dialog? Action? Narrative?
- What/who stands in the way?
- Do you know yet if the character will get what he or she wants?<sup>4</sup>

Exercise # 6-9: Write a one paragraph summary of your entire novel, the sort of thing that might appear as jacket copy. Try to be both complimentary and honest.

Exercise # 6-10: Write it again with a lighter tone- or a portentous one, suggesting that this is The Great American Novel. Which seems to fit your novel better? Does one way seem more attractive to a potential reader? Does either one suggest things that you might want to emphasize or de-emphasize?

Exercise # 6-11: Pretend you have to pitch your plot to a movie mogul. Set a kitchen timer for 45 seconds, and that's all you have. Listen to yourself and you may discover at least what is most outstanding in your mind about your story. This is called the "elevator pitch," when you catch the producer/editor in the elevator and have this one brief chance to describe your project.

Exercise # 6-12: Write your novel in 25 words or less. Again, this has to do with finding what's most important in it.

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<sup>4</sup> Idea adapted from Bernays and Painter, *What If?: Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers*, Harper Perennial, New York, 1990.

Exercise # 6-13: Here is another exercise for getting an imaginative grip on your novel. Get yourself comfortable and close your eyes. Think of your novel. Imagine what your novel would be if it were a body of flowing water. Would it be a great river through the jungle like the Amazon or a small mountain stream or a creek hidden by its banks? An industrial river with many tug boats and cities on its banks or a river cutting through high barren cliffs? Where would the reader launch a boat to enter the river? And what kind of craft (tug boat? Kayak? Raft?) would the reader use? Finally, where does the river go? Or, alternatively, what is its source? Write this exercise, then read it over, looking for insights into the structure and pacing of your work.

One final graphic representation of how the energy flows in your novel is the Dramatic Arc, which is rather like a rounded Freitag's Pyramid. The usual pattern is Introduction- conflict development- resolution, with a big hump in the middle called climax. Can you make a sketch like this labeled for your novel? *Oradell at Sea* would be something like: Oradell on the cruise ship, her past and her companions. There is a labor dispute on shipboard and simultaneous conflicts within the Weston family. An accused employee escapes; the Weston girl hooks up with her boyfriend; Oradell tells her son about the sister he never met. The climax, however, the top of the arc, is probably when Oradell comes to terms with the love of her life in flashback.

Arc of plot, then, is the shape or movement of the narrative. A story might start quietly, rise gradually (or quickly) through various complications to a climax which could be envisioned as the top of the arc, and then swoop on down the other side to the end. It's a useful way to think of a piece of writing this way to get a sense of its shape and rhythm, but it is probably more useful to a writer to think of it *after* the piece is drafted.

Exercise # 6-14:

Draw the *dramatic arc* of your story, with the parts labeled with some of

the conflicts and resolutions you have in mind.

Remember, some narratives never do develop a "plot." They may be fictional biography (born, grew up, lived, died) or even picaresque (series of events only loosely connected). The fictional autobiography, or a novel that creates the illusion of being a life story or a diary, can also be a strong structures.

### Story Telling and Pacing

Once you have at least a hypothetical shape for your novel- some idea of where it's going- one of the most important things to think about is where you slow down, where you speed up. We will look further at these issues in the chapters on film techniques and what novels do best (among which are to slow down time and to skip over decades), but I want to say a word here about the value of summarizing and narrating. One decision you will be making throughout the revising process is deciding what needs to be dramatized and what needs to be summarized. We touched on this in our discussion of scene.

There are times when all that is needed is a brief summary or simple (or not so simple) narration. Summary is essential in getting through a long project. You can't dramatize everything. Summarizing is especially good for those scenes you thought you had to write and found boring: *Now I have to dramatize his first day at work when what I really want to get to the part where he's been working for a couple of weeks already!* But you don't have to do it that way! You can simply write, "One morning after John had been at his new job for three weeks..."

Exercise # 6-15: Try summarizing a scene you've dramatized, or writing a new one that is told in summary.

Summary speeds up the story and skips over less important details, but narration can also be a joy to read for itself. Straight narration, undramatized, is the style of many of the greatest of the old tales from



prehistory, passed down from grandmother to daughter to grandson. It can be witty and engaging, especially when the telling voice is a strong one. Consider this passage of “dialogue” from Jane Austen that is totally narrated and not dramatized at all- but doesn't feel that way.

Conversation, however, was not wanted, for Sir John was very chatty, and Lady Middleton had taken the wise precaution of bringing with her their eldest child, a fine little boy about six years old, by which means there was one subject always to be recurred to by the ladies in case of extremity, for they had to inquire his name and age, admire his beauty, and ask him questions, which his mother answered for him, while he hung about her, and held down his head, to the great surprise of her ladyship, who wondered at his being so shy before company, as he could make noise enough at home. On every formal visit a child ought to be of the party by way of provision for discourse. In the present case it took up ten minutes to determine whether the boy were most like his father or mother, and in what particular he resembled either; for of course everybody differed, and everybody was astonished at the opinion of the others.<sup>5</sup>

Summary and narration, then, will move you between your scenes, and if you have an engaging narrative voice, whether first-person or third, the narration itself can be part of the pleasure. Sometimes, however, as you look over what you drafted, you'll notice that you have written about something that happens repeatedly by summarizing it, giving it as a typical event:

He always used to get a cup of coffee at the greasy spoon next to the station house.

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<sup>5</sup> From Chapter Six of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*.

“Used to” is a signal that something of potential interest, worth dramatizing, may be coming up. If your hero the cop always stops at this greasy spoon, you are wasting an opportunity for character development and maybe even plot twists by dramatizing one or two of his typical stops there. Perhaps he will overhear someone talking about something important, or perhaps he’ll get into an argument and almost throw a punch and realize how tightly wound he is at the present moment. In revising, I try to move away from “he used to” or “they always” towards dramatizing at least one example and then perhaps summarizing.

Here’s what I mean. In this first draft, the writer is just coming up with the idea:

She always used to notice how that neighborhood was an all- out assault on the senses. She would see dilapidated buses whizzing down the road with passengers literally hanging out the doors and riding on the roof....

Then the writer looks back and decides to dramatize this as the first time the character arrives in the neighborhood:

She pressed her face against the window as they turned into the neighborhood called The Stews. Through the crack in the window she smelled something frying and something rotting. A dilapidated bus whizzed past, and hanging on the back was a grayhaired old man with his white tunic waving in the wind...

If you can specify and dramatize- if this is one event rather than something that happens repeatedly- even if it is only a brief moment, the writing will usually be livelier and stronger.

#### The Best Time to Outline

So when *do* you outline? We’ve been talking about story bins and archipelagos in the South Pacific, and how an engaging narrative voice

can summarize almost anything in a novel. When do you actually make an outline? For once I have an answer. You should outline after you've drafted at least a third to a half of your novel. I don't really mean you should count pages, I just mean that an outline is most useful after you've done a substantial amount of writing. Notes or a few brief phrases about the direction for the story- these make sense to do early on; but the time to do a fuller outline is when you lose momentum, perhaps as you begin to lose track of what you've already written. An outline is a terrific way to remember your book, so I think the best time to outline is when you can no longer easily hold the whole novel in your mind.

Outlining is also another way to explore your ideas and develop your story, but it is especially useful for keeping a grip on the details and chronology of a novel. I've already suggested a kind of rough outlining technique for early in the process of writing the novel (the bins and containers at the beginning of this chapter), but I find outlining essential as I accumulate material. I usually begin to keep an ongoing outline after I've written at least fifty and usually more like a hundred pages of my novel. Around this time, I begin to forget things. I forget that I already mentioned Uncle Ambrose, and if I do remember him, I don't remember his favorite brand of chewing tobacco. Or was it that he chewed tobacco on page 27 and dipped snuff on 127?

To keep a grip on my materials, then, I set up some files (I use electronic files in my word processor, but a handwritten notebook is fine too). I set up a "Character Names" file, and a "Chronology" file. Sometimes the chronology file doesn't have actual dates, but things like "Day One:" and "Day Two." I may put down what I think are the relative ages of important characters. I note changes here when I make changes in the manuscript. This keeping the facts straight has to do with making the novel feel or appear real and true- verisimilitude. This is part of the grounding in a novel that makes your world feel real within its own boundaries. We'll talk more about this in the last chapter, *Strategy 10: Revise Your World*.

These files, like just about every other stage of novel writing, ideally give new ideas and even new material or perhaps solutions to problems. Once, for example, putting down birth dates gave me the idea of having the main character (a first-person narrator who likes one-liners) be the youngest of the baby boomer generation while her mother was in the oldest age cohort of the boomers. The character gets a lot of mileage out of complaining that she and her mother are both boomers.

I also establish a log of my work. This is a dated line or phrase just to remind me of where I am. Often it simply says, “Jan 18- decent draft of first half of Chapter 6. Start at the START.” Again, this has to do simply with keeping me on task, and getting me back to work efficiently after a long week-end or a period of teaching when I haven’t been able to write. The ideal would, of course, be to sit down and dash out an entire draft of your novel in one burst of creative energy, but this rarely happens to novelists- not to this novelist, anyhow. You hear occasionally of someone who wrote an entire novel in a month, never leaving his work room except for a run around the park, meals delivered, sleeping on a cot- but much more common is the novel that starts in a rush and bogs down, gets restarted later.

Along with files of information and reminders and the log, I also make an outline that actually looks like an outline. Below is a sample from one of my novels. There are some “to do” notes at the top, and the chronology is given with days relative to one another. Some of the chapters are set in the past, so that is indicated. Chapters have titles, which were not preserved in the published novel, but helped me think about the chapters. In the end, I liked the elegance of simple chapter numbers. Occasionally I note what page I’m on, more as it goes along. There are asterisks to indicate that I have a pretty satisfactory draft of that chapter. As this is a late draft, only a few chapters don’t have their asterisks, indicating that part of this outline actually covers ideas that aren’t drafted yet.

## Oradell at Sea Outline

To work on:

Make it so she never dreams of Mike

But get in more conscious visions of Mike.

Get rid of references to 1980's.

\* Chap1: Oradell's Table. [Cruise Day 1]

Oradell's dream of the ship engine. Thus opens with Oradell as girl from "West Fork" with drunk father, and so forth.

Oradell's dining table group- she likes to be outrageous. Various things mentioned, hinted at: Lance, "the boys," Jaime and the knife.

\* Chap2: The Wee Hours [Cruise Day 1 continued]

Oradell awake the first night. Stavros comes, then later, the dream of the Giant Miner.

\* Chapter Three: When Oradell Was Almost Adopted [Far Past– end of the 1930's] Background chapter: West Fork, its class structure, Oradell's dad and his drinking, and so forth. Incident about deetees and sleeping at the Pierces'.

\* Chapter Four: Two Bars. ["Second Day at sea"] Pacific ocean cruise; then just before dinner the day after.] [39] The jaeger and the girl Tricia. Oradell liking Tricia, reluctantly. Tricia is thinking she may fall in love.

\* Chapter Five: Oradell Was Never a Whore [Some about the late '40's in Las Vegas, but mostly late 1940 into the beginning of 1941] [55]

Mentions her two tricks during time with Harry, which is late in the 1940's.

Her affair with Mr. Myers. Mike Brown mentioned off and on.

\* Chapter Six: Oradell & Tricia [ Cruise Day 3] [73]

Oradell & Tricia have a conversation. Tricia *wants* Nikko, but thinks he's a coward for being afraid to get involved with her. Oradell tells her story to Tricia. Tricia wants to "do something."

Oradell expresses admiration for Mike, how he saved her, but also ambivalence.

\*Chapter Seven: Oradell Gets Married [Late winter, spring and summer 1941] [80]

Mike Brown. Her father has died, she has broken off with Mr. Myers, without saying anything directly to him.

\*Chapter Eight: Battle of the Dining Room [Evening of Cruise Day 5, Evening before the Panama Canal] [90]

They go to the dining room.

Jaime attacks Mr. Reese.

\*Chapter Nine: Oradell Is a Widow [Indian summer, fall 1941] [98]

\*Chapter Ten: Oradell Refuses [110]

Oradell refuses. Short chapter when she turns down Stavros, in advance, never lets him ask. Night of Cruise Day 5/ into wee a.m. hours of Cruise Day 6 which is the Panama Canal Day.

\*Chapter Eleven: Baby [113]

Oradell remembers the baby & leaving West Fork.

\*Chapter Twelve: Oradell in New York [The same night - Cruise Day 5/Cruise Day 6- but scenes from the early 1960's, when she first moved to NYC] [118]

\*Chapter Thirteen: Jaime [Same night, Night of Cruise Day 5/6, novel's present] [128]

She keeps Jaime for the night; insists it is just this once.

Imagines it's Mike.

\*Chapter Fourteen: Panama Canal Day [Morning Cruise Day 6] [134]

\*Chapter Fifteen: Oradell's Last Visit to West Fork [@ 1952] [149]

Her trip to West Fork with Lance.

Updates West Fork; Scene with Grace Howard.

Status of The Baby

Chapter Sixteen: Panama Canal - Afternoon

A postprandial drink with Cathy- dysfunctional Westons, Oradell feeling small?

## Chapter Seventeen: There Are Still Bosses

Stavros comes, asks her to hide Jaime again. Reese & First Officer come looking. She hides Jaime. Thoughts and memories of Mike Brown Maybe add something about Mike? Mike, Joe the Organizer, Jaime and Stavros, but also Tracy and even Cathy. Add to final chapter that the Giant Miner was Mike? Add sense of Mike as just a man, no Saviors, and so forth.??

## Chapter Eighteen: End [Next day: Cruise Day 7, Cartagena]

Dream of giant miner? conversation with Mike? Plan to save Jaime? Oradell sick??

There are no Roman numerals, but there's something better, which is that since it's on my computer, I can update it at almost the end of every writing session. And that is how I use my formal outline. Every few weeks I save a copy, just for archival purposes, or in case some day I want to look back at my process. I notice, for example, that there is a character in this draft named "Tricia" who became "Tracy" in the published version. But mostly, I update, making sure the main events are down, important changes, characters, and occasional notes on where I want to go next. An outline like this is useful to me both as a memory device- if I had been away from the manuscript for a week or ten days, I would read over this rather than read through the whole novel and chance getting sucked into polishing when I really want to push on- and as a way to look over the story and think about ways to rearrange things, or what's missing. In this novel, I thought a lot about the balance between the present on the cruise ship and Oradell's past.

This is my process- one way. I've worked with writers who do very different things. Some create elaborate file cards or elaborate tables with categories like:

PART

TITLE  
[Theme/reference]

CHAPTER

TITLE

Time

Setting

Action

Remembrances

Conflicts/parallels

Monologues/stream of consciousness

Images/quotations

Research to do

Notes

This writer made up many blanks of these sheets and said they were particularly useful to him for seeing what chapters and sections were missing: No action? Too much monologuing?

Another student used cards with information about:

Scene Number:

Point of View

Conflict/Change that advances the story

Character development

These are alternative ways of organizing and looking back at your material- as a way of beginning revision, in other words. Find out what



works for you. One other writer I worked with made an idiosyncratic “outline” that precisely fit her novel. She made up three columns as follows:

Present Time Story

River Related Action

Revelation of Past

Chap One

Chap Two

Chap Three

Etc.

Clearly this was a character-and theme-driven novel rather than a heavily plotted one, and the idea was that the writer wanted each chapter to have action that moved the story forward, plus some imagery or action in the river, and revelations of the past. She worked with this after maybe half the novel was drafted, and it helped her think about it. This is the real purpose of outlining, beyond reminders of facts: to help us think about our big baggy monster novels.

Exercise # 6-16: Write an outline, not necessarily a Roman Number I., II., III., type but some visual or graphic representation of the story so far, and how you imagine it continuing. When you write the outline, go from beginning to end, however sketchy the final chapters might be. Use of the formats above, or make up your own.

Doodle, make graphic versions, take notes- create elaborate formal outlines. Just make sure that what you are doing feels right for you and your novel, and that it doesn't get in the way of writing.

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