

The Novel as a Project

Staring down at a blank page and contemplating a completed 100K+ word novel is a scary prospect. It's like that old adage of eating an elephant; you can't eat it all at once. A novel is like that pachyderm. When faced with the task of eating the whole thing, it is daunting. But it is a lot more palatable if looked at in digestible pieces. That's where project management comes in. A novel is a project. Like developing software or building a house, it's a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product or service. Of course sometimes it doesn't seem temporary (it took Christopher Nolan ten years to write *Inception* and Ayn Rand ten years to write *Atlas Shrugged*) but a novel has a beginning, middle and an end- that day you kiss it goodbye and send it off into the world. Before I began writing novels, I was an IT Project Manager, so when I started writing novels it was only logical to apply some of the techniques I had used in project management to assure that I was using my writing time most effectively. This may sound like I'm making novel writing a 'science' instead of an 'art' but the novel is a mix of art and science. The creative left brain and the structured left-brain working together to build the novel. There are tasks, during all three stages of the novel development - process, planning, writing and promotion - that can be structured into organized processes.



Planning the Project

It all starts with a plan. The more time you spend getting organized to write and planning what to do along the way, the less time you are going to waste when you are in the throws of writing and your mind is focused on your characters and your story. Characters can be greedy with your time when you are in the 'zone' and the last thing you want to distract you is to spend time wondering, "what do they do next?" The following is a breakdown of some of the tools to use during the planning process:



Time Management Plan - I'm the kind of person that schedules everything. I make dinner menus weeks in advance and am usually packed for a trip three days before the flight takes off. Somewhere scribbled on my Day-planner is; "November 18- 4:00- 4:15- 'be spontaneous'. But not everyone plans instinctively (or obsessively), so here are some time management tricks.

- Block out a time to write - Tom Robbins says that every day at 9:00 he enters his home office and sits and waits for his muse. If she comes, great, he is off and writing. If not, he sits and waits, fingers hovering over the keyboard until noon. If she doesn't show by noon he goes out to play. Sit at your computer and wait for the muse at the same time every day, if you can, for a set amount of time. Granted, not everybody can block out a specific time every day, but sometime every day, tune everything else out and open yourself to your muse. If she doesn't appear in that allotted time, take a break and try again later or another day, but be there and ready for her visit.
- Eliminate distractions. Turn off your television and avoid checking e-mails or facebook. No excuses when waiting for your muse.
- Set goals, daily, weekly, monthly. My goal is to average 2K words a day during the writing and a chapter a week during edits. You won't always meet your goal but it gives you something to shoot for.

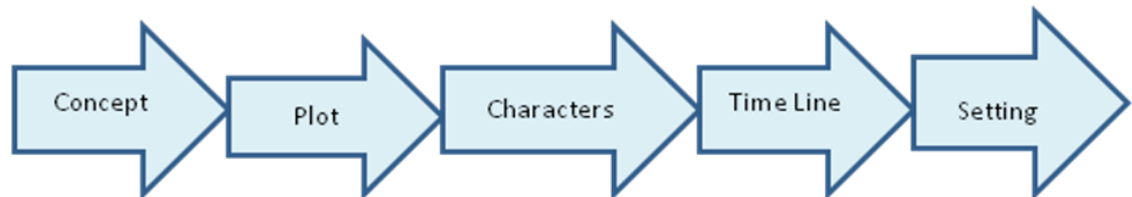
2. Resource Plan

Writing is a lonely job but you can't do it alone. Sounds like a dichotomy, right? The point is that it helps to have a network of people that you can reach out to when needed. When you are stuck on a scene or that perfect word is on the tip of your tongue, it's good to have another writer to contact. Hunter Thompson was famous for calling up fellow writers in the middle of the night and asking, "what's another word for mendacity?" The key is to identify a 'go to' list of resources so that help is at your fingertips. Just remember, if someone is your resource you also need to be there for him or her. If you don't go to other people's funerals, they won't go to yours.

- **Research** - Make a list of research you are going to need for your book. What books, videos, music do you need to purchase? What trips do you need to take? Who do you need to talk to? Build these into your time and financial plans.
- **Reviewers** – A good reviewer is worth his or her weight in gold. Identify your potential reviewers early. Joining a review group will give you some reviewer resources, but be careful to choose a group with folks in your genre. A science fiction reader may not give you effective insight into how to make your romance novel better.
- **Editors/proofreaders** – A good proofreader is worth their weight in gold. Always enlist the help of a proofreader before you sent that manuscript off to the agent or publisher. If an agent or an editor at a publishing house catches mistakes in your query, your synopsis or the first few pages of your manuscript, she just might stop reading at that point.

Writing Plan

- Break down the novel into tasks and milestones - Like the elephant analogy, trying to conceptualize the whole novel all at once is daunting, but if you break it down into bites, it seems more palatable. The following depicts a novel breakdown process:



- **Concept** - I start with the basic concept, I take a couple of ideas and figure out how they connect. Hint: everything connects in some way or another.
- **Plot Draft** - Once I know, or have a pretty good idea, how the story will go, I set up a story board that visually maps the plot flow. Impose a timeline on your flowchart. Does the time flow day to day, week to week, are the time gaps realistic? Once you have your story-board, create a word document and make a hard page break for each chapter. Give each chapter a working title so that you know at a glance what is supposed to happen, that makes finding that chapter easier later.



So now you have the plot divided among chapters. If you map it out this way, you can write on each chapter as you have an inspiration. You may write on Chapter 4 today, 11 tomorrow, back to Chapter 2, then Chapter 20. This way you don't get stuck in the plot line. If you hit a snag, just jump to another chapter and work on that until the answer to the snag pops into your head. It works.

- **Character Draft** - Now I do my character profiles. I visualize each character standing on a stage telling me about their lives from birth to present. They reveal their innermost thoughts, feelings, hopes, desires, fears, etc. I watch their movements, gestures, facial expressions while they are speaking; a nervous tic, pulling an ear, crossing arms, tapping foot, etc., and I take notes. I also ask them questions; "What happened in your life that may have spawned your fear of caves?" These will help me round out the characters later. One trick is to describe a character in your manuscript by having two other people talking about that

character. You get the image of that character in the reader's heads and readers love to be in on a private conversation about a main character.

- **Setting Draft** - Next flesh out the sights, sounds, smells, etc for each scene. What is the weather like? Is that a train whistle in the background? Does someone smell honeysuckle or fresh baked bread? Do these smells bring back a childhood memory?
- **Word-Smith Draft** – Now you can put what you learned in that creative writing class to use. Here is where you go word by word and ask yourself, “is this the perfect word for this sentence, the perfect sentence for this paragraph and the perfect paragraph for this chapter. Like Mark Twain said, “the difference between the almost right word and the right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.”

Think you're about done? You are just getting started. Now it's time to edit:

Editing Plan - For every vision, there is an equal but opposite revision. Quality control in writing is all about editing. I generally go through about four edits once I have a first draft.

- **Story Edit** – Does the plot still work? Is it so complex that readers get distracted? Is it so simple that readers lose interest? Does your theme convey clearly to the reader? Is the voice effective to tell the story and interesting? Is there enough conflict to keep the reader's interest?
- **Character Edit** – Are the characters consistent with their profiles in every situation or scene? Does John have green eyes in one scene and blue later? Have you created physical ‘tells’ that convey each character's emotions through their actions - when she rubs her eyes the reader knows she doesn't believe what she is seeing. Are emotional characteristics the same- same sense of humor, consistent fears and aspirations throughout the novel?
- **Proofreading Edit** – Here is where you go through the manuscript, word by word, and try to catch all the misspelled words, punctuation and grammar mistakes. Then call in your proofreader for a final scan. The more ‘nits’ you can catch up front, the more time you editor can focus on more substantive work on your novel and the quicker your edits will go. Even after your editor makes all those revisions (and she will), proof it one more time. Don't rely on the publisher's proofreader to catch everything.
- **Pre-Editor's Edit** – There is no passion in the world like the passion to alter someone else's work. This is sometimes one of the most challenging aspects of

writing, trying to look at your manuscript through an editor's eyes and anticipate their questions and changes. I remember a writer who had written, "He entered the double-wide and tossed his keys on the counter." Her editor had scribbled "double wide what?" on the page. I am convinced that above Dickens's draft where it said, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," his editor scribbled, "make up your mind!" It helps to do global searches for overused words like suddenly, really, just, which, etc. Check for repetitive words on the same page, passive versus active voice, overuse of adjectives and adverbs, etc.

Tip: *Change the font for the last edit. This lets you see things you may have missed looking at the same font over and over.*

Promotion Plan

You can have the most wonderful novel ever written but if nobody knows about it they won't be exactly jumping off the shelves of your local bookstore or clogging the Internet with e-book orders. The best way to promote your book is to get people involved in your project early and often.

- Know your market. Whether it's Romance, Science Fiction, Historical Fiction, Horror, Speculative Fiction or Steampunk, you have a certain group of potential readers. Your job is to figure out where these folks are and how to reach them.
- Know what medium works best for your genre and check out local and national print and electronic newsletters, newspapers, local entertainment weeklies, etc. Put together a chart for quick referral and to guide you in your daily, weekly, communication:

<i>Type of communication</i>	<i>Communication Vehicle</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Writing Groups	Join a writing group, local, state, genre specific, etc.	Monthly
Facebook	Set up a fan page, post excerpts of your book, and get fans involved in your project.	Daily
Blogs	Write blogs on writing, your experiences researching your book	Bi-monthly
Twitter	Give, give, give, ask	Daily
Conferences	Attend local or regional or National Writer's Conferences	Annual/Semi-annual
Websites	Contests, scavenger hunts, guest interviews. Writer's chats.	As available
Other Media, newspapers, radio, television	Local radio station or public access television interviews, local newsletters, entertainment weeklies, etc.	As available

Financial Plan

First and foremost get a professional accountant, set up a LLC and begin keeping track of your expenses - all of them. Document purchases of everything from research books, music, printer paper and internet fees, to gas in your car to go to that writers conference or that research trip to the south of France. It's all deductible. I have created four Excel spreadsheets named: Research (books, trips), Office Expenses (computer, printer ink, also if you dedicate a room in your house to writing, you can deduct that % of your household expenses – 1 writing room in a 5 room house = 20% of your mortgage, electricity, home repairs, etc), Promotion (book give aways remember those free e-books you give away can be written off at retail value) and Miscellaneous.

Now with your plans in place, you should be able to begin eating that elephant one bite at a time. Good Luck!

V. Mark Covington is a Certified Project Management Professional, the author of five published novels, *Heavenly Pleasure*, *Bullfish*, *Homemade Sin*, *2012 Montezuma's Revenge* and *The Church of the Path of Least Resistance*, and one play, *Shakespeare in the Trailer Park*. He currently lives in Richmond, Virginia's Museum District where he writes novels exploring the cosmically comical nature of the universe, the purpose of which is to create someone who lives in Richmond, Virginia and writes novels exploring the cosmically comical nature of the universe.

You can contact Mark at:
<http://www.vmarkcovington.com/>