

Article about writing

Writers Aren't All the Same!

By Lesley Marshall

There are as many different ways of writing as there are types of books. And there are no rules in this business - if it works for you, for at least this book, then that's the right way to do it. It's a good idea to read how-to books by lots of other writers, learning how those writers write and then trying out some methods that you think might work for you, but in the end your best system could be quite different from other people's.

Beware of writers who say you have to write in the way that works for them -no system will apply to everyone. Use only the ways that pertain to you.

There are basically two kinds of writers - planners and "wingers". If you're a winger (also known as an organic writer or pantsier, among other terms) you shouldn't do too much planning. Organic writers find that if they plan too much they stop wanting to write the book/story because they already know how it's going to go - it's no longer a journey of discovery. Planners, on the other hand, might spend weeks, months, even years mapping out a book before they write a word. Planners probably don't need to do as much rewriting as organic writers, but they usually take longer to get a first draft done. However one multi-published author maintains that his charts and notes make the first draft come faster and he doesn't need to rewrite.

An organic writer might start with nothing more than the image of a scene, the name of a character, an idea for an ending, or a vague thought based on a newspaper cutting or TV interview. She'll then start writing, and often have no idea what's going to come out until it's on paper. There'll be scenes that seem to be leading nowhere that she's sure she'll have to cut later, but she'll leave them there until she's finished the first draft. Often then she'll find the scenes were absolutely vital, and led to something that startled her as much as it will her future readers. It's exciting stuff, being that sort of writer, but also scary - you're seriously heading out into the open sea in a coracle at night with a toothbrush for an oar. An American novelist said it's like driving from one city to another at night with the lights on low beam. You can't see ahead more than the light's reach - a few metres only - yet you can travel the entire length of the country that way if you have faith and just keep going.

A writer of detective fiction said she never knows who's dunnit until she's finished, and then of course has to go back and seed in a few extra red herrings and/or clues -mostly clues, I think, since the red herrings were probably already there, fooling her along with her future readers. Last year I edited half a murder mystery for a writer who was approaching agents and publishers with it, and I found it totally frustrating because I had about four suspects in my head, all jostling for prominence, and when I asked her who had done the dirty deed she didn't have any idea either. We had n intriguing discussion about which one it might be without coming to any conclusions. What was really interesting was that later, when we both found out, it was rather shocking, and not any of the original suspects, and yet the clues were all there. She'd written them, I'd edited around them, and yet neither of us had seen them. I'd had a niggles that I was missing something and so had she, but we couldn't see it until she'd written it down.

I remember another book where the artist hero painted the heroine, and painted in her history of abuse without her having told him about it. It appalled her, because she thought she'd hidden her past from the world. It also shocked the writer when she wrote it in because she hadn't realised, yet I'd seen it coming

while I was editing the earlier chapters. So the writer's subconscious had known all along and was leading her up to it. Note that this was a very experienced writer with a couple of dozen books under her belt.

Working with organic writers is fascinating, especially when they're under deadline and are frantically feeding me chapters as they go – we occasionally discover I know more about the characters than the writer does because I'm reading (*seeing*) the clues she's writing, but she's only writing them without realising that they're clues. It may sound odd but it's true.

If you're a planner, try various methods until one works for you. Some writers won't start without character sketches, a theme, a well-thought-out plot (written down), or a breakdown of the story that may run to fifty pages. Others have notes, charts, and illustrations of scenes and people pinned on their study walls. One uses a roll of cheap wallpaper and writes down the entire plot, making sure there are turning points or "highs" in the right places – not too spaced out but not all bunched together - before starting her book. There are several charting methods, including the three-act structure beloved of screenwriters and many novelists, and the mind maps of Tony Buzan's *Use Your Head*, which many writers enthusiastically use.

An article in the magazine *The Writer* suggested "interviewing" every character, using a series of forty questions to find out all about their likes, dislikes, backgrounds and secrets, and only then begin writing. And of course there are computer programmes that help writers plan every aspect of their story, checking that they have the "right" mix of characterisation, action, background etc. either before they begin or as they go along.

I've said there are two categories of writers, but even this isn't entirely true, because within those two categories there are many variations. One author I know writes all the narrative and then adds dialogue afterwards; another does it the other way around. An excellent writer I have worked with writes a whole collection of scenes featuring a large cast of characters, and when she's kind of run out of ideas she looks at them all, juggles them rather like a pack of cards into some kind of order, and there's her book. Totally weird and I still can't believe it works, but that's what she does.

There are also in-between writers, but they're not as common. One Auckland writer rewrites and rewrites and rewrites the first chapter for ages - weeks sometimes. And when she's perfectly satisfied with that, rips into the rest without rewriting until she's finished. A Brisbane one said she has to keep polishing as she goes so that by the end there's very little rewriting at all.

Some organic writers write chronologically until they get stuck, and then they might go and write a flashback to find out what's pushing their character's buttons, or write the end so they have a road map of where they're going. Or even write that last scene and then keep working backwards, scene by scene (again, I can't imagine doing that, but it sometimes works for a ms that's blocked in the middle).

For some writers, editing as they go, writing synopses early on, drawing up chapter-by-chapter or even scene-by-scene outlines, or talking things over with a trusted advisor can help them shape their story. Other writers find they've killed their book if they do it. In my early editing days I sometimes didn't realise when a discussion with an organic writer was going too far and likely to spoil things for the writing process, but later on I could see that point and we'd stop it, occasionally rather abruptly. Then I'd wait and see what happened in the ms. As would the writer!

In the end, whatever works for you is the way you should do it, although it's always worth trying other systems, especially if you're having trouble with a particular book. Depending on the kind of writer you are, too much pre-planning or editing while you write *can* stifle your creativity, and certainly would with most organic writers – but I'm not saying *will*, only *can*. The same goes for writing a synopsis before you've finished the first draft, or discussing the plot with an outsider. For others these may be necessary steps to help them formulate a coherent storyline and create realistic characters, stop them wandering off down dead-end byways that distract them from the plot, and prevent them falling love with minor characters who don't advance or enhance the story.

You'll eventually find out what works for you and, once you know that's what you should do. Whatever system it is. And no matter what criticism or astonishment this may engender in other people. Or even yourself.

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