

How to get a novel started

Who says you have to write it in a linear fashion? Constructing it 'out of order' might be just the approach you need

By Meredith Sue Willis

HAVE YOU BEEN walking around with an idea for a novel in your head? Maybe you've even written some notes or a beautiful first sentence. Yet somehow, life has intervened, and the size of the project seems too daunting. You've put off the novel time after time, but now you're finally ready to get serious. You're ready to start.

You can begin with as little as a remembered face, a scrap of overheard dialogue, or that beautiful first sentence. Maybe you have a terrific plot idea. ... A bizarre murder has been committed at the Louvre. A well-dressed woman has thrown herself under a train, and you want to figure out why. You've imagined a little pig who makes friends with a spider. The wonderful thing about a novel is that you can start almost anywhere. There is, however, one *sine qua non*—one thing you'll never write a novel without. That thing is: sitting down to do it. Special computer software, beautiful, leatherbound blank books—they're all useless without the act of writing. You might write a poem when inspiration strikes you, but to write the sheer number of words required for a novel (generally at least 80,000) you're going to need to set aside some time. At the very least, it's a lot of typing. Whatever your idea, you have to begin with the time to do actual *writing*: not daydreaming, not doodling, not researching or

outlining, but putting words on a computer screen or pad.

With that said, let me offer some steps to help you get under way.

1 To start your novel, set aside time during the next month or six weeks to do some substantial writing. Be realistic about your life—you don't need 12 hours a day. Some people discipline themselves by taking a writing class or meeting with other writers. An hour a day would be wonderful, but even if you can only set aside 6 to 8 a.m. on Sunday for the next month, you could still get 40 or 50 pages drafted. So think about your lifestyle and find a time when you can consistently sit down to write. Then make the commitment to yourself *in writing*—a contract with yourself—and when the hour arrives, sit down and try the following.

2 Write a scene in which the main character enters a new place. This works especially well if you



The author offers a number of key "out of order" prompts which, by getting you to focus on particular characters and scenes, can help launch your novel.

haven't worked much on your character yet. As the character observes and learns about the new place, you'll learn things about your character. The place can be indoors or out, crowded with people or empty. It can be a hospital room, an elegant restaurant, a jewelry store the character is going to rob, a baseball field where she's about to try out for the softball team. Pick a place and have your

character enter it and observe.

Here's the important thing: Use as many of your senses as possible. Have your character see the layout and the colors and objects, but also have her or him notice temperature, smells, the texture of the grass, the sound of glasses tinkling or breakers crashing on the rocks. It's not that description is good in itself, but that it is one of the chief ways we have to direct the reader's imagination. Perhaps even more important, in the process of describing you are forced to temporarily slow down your writing. As you observe the character's world in your imagination, new ideas can bubble up. Maybe there's a character across the room who could become important to the plot. Maybe the odor of frying onions triggers a memory.

In the following passage, the main character from my novel *Oradell at Sea* is a little girl from a West Virginia coal camp whose father has disappeared. A store manager's family is taking her in.

Oradell cried herself out. It was windy up on the West Side, and she started shivering in her cotton dress. A street car trundled past, and some boys were playing an imaginary game of baseball with no equipment outside the Trolley Stop hot dog stand. A Ford roadster backfired, and a dog was barking all the way over on the baseball diamond on the East Side. She picked out the Company store and the Rialto movie theater. Behind everything, hills, yellowish brown fields, reddish tree tips.

"Daddy should of took me with him," she said. "I would of gone if he'd only asked."

She climbed the rest of the steps, and sat down on the stone porch, the cold coming right through her dress and underpants. She could hear Mrs. Talkington on the phone inside, but she didn't go in. After a while, Sarah Ellen came along the side of the house. She didn't see Oradell, so Oradell said "Boo," and Sarah Ellen screamed, and Oradell laughed and felt better.

Sarah Ellen took her inside and introduced her to the new baby, no different from any other baby Oradell had seen. Oradell was much more interested in the house: spacious with shiny wood floors

that smelled like lemon, carpets, big chairs with fresh slipcovers for spring and lace curtains and a new floor model Zenith Radi-organ with a walnut finish cabinet.

Oradell got her own little room with a lavender chenille bedspread. Between Oradell's room and Sarah Ellen's was the bathroom, which was probably Oradell's favorite place in the whole house. It was as big as a bedroom, with a free standing lion-footed bathtub and a porcelain sink that Oradell and Sarah Ellen needed a stool to use, and a huge commode with a wooden seat.

"I'd just sleep in here," said Oradell, not really planning a joke, but when Sarah Ellen laughed, she made the most of it and climbed in the tub and pretended to snore. Then Sarah Ellen climbed in too and they pretended the tub was flying them to a movie set in Hollywood, and they had a long discussion about which movie and which leading man.

All in all, getting adopted went pretty well that afternoon.

When I started to write that passage, I meant to use a little of the research I'd done on life in the early 1940s, and I knew Oradell was going to feel bad about moving in with strangers, but I did *not* know about the bathtub and her joke, and how getting the other girl to laugh at her would make her feel more at home—and how entertaining people would become part of her personality throughout the book. Settings, then, are not just a backdrop for the action; they're part of the story, and they can also move your story forward.

3 Once you've got your character exploring a place, and you've perhaps learned a little more about him or her, bring in a minor character. The passage above introduced Sarah Ellen, Mrs. Talkington and the baby. Step 3 is to use the same techniques you used for describing a place to describe a minor character. Once again, observe through the main character's consciousness, using as many of the senses as you can.

The senses can also be useful in giving order to a physical description. For example, we often see someone first from a distance. We get an overall

impression, notice general physical characteristics, how the person is dressed, maybe how they walk and their gestures. Then, as we come closer, we might hear the other person speaking and perhaps learn something from the tone of voice, from what they're saying, from their accent or speech quirks. Once the other is close enough, the senses of smell and touch come into play as well: Does the character smell of cigarettes? Does a whiff of cold air cling to the clothes? An exotic cologne? If the people shake hands, what kind of handshake does the other person have? Is the skin of the hand rough or damp? The grip firm or hesitant? What about the texture of hair and clothing?

If you write a passage using the senses in this kind of detail, you may well fine yourself overwriting, but overwriting at this stage can lead to interesting passages you might not otherwise have come up with, as well as insights into the major and minor character and even useful plot elements. What does it mean that the woman smells of cigarette smoke? If she's a smoker, will she cough at some inopportune moment? If the other's hand is damp, is he nervous? Why?

It's my opinion that, in general, overwriting is more good than bad when you're beginning your draft. A long description can be broken up and used later. That is, you may want to have the initial description be all visual,

WORKOUT

A USEFUL rule of thumb: Any time a minor character appears in a novel (a homeless man, an annoying waiter, a bratty little girl), use the same character at least once more to give extra closure and depth to your novel. Look over what you've written and find some character who has a "walk-on." Write a passage from the second half of your novel in which this character reappears. It doesn't have to be a dramatized scene—it can be a memory or even an appearance in a dream.

—M.S.W.

someone seen from a distance, and later bring the character back talking and smelling of lavender.

4 Now have this same minor character reappear in the second half of the novel in a scene with dialogue. Many people come to novel writing with the mistaken impression that you start at the beginning and write straight through in linear fashion to the end. A good revision technique is to go over your manuscript in the order in which a reader encounters it, but, for your first draft, sometimes it's better to write out of order.

So for this step, pretend you've already written, say, the first 100 pages, and now this minor character reappears. You may want to use some of the leftover description from the first appear-

ance, but the heart of this step is to have the main character and minor character talk. They may have casual, static conversation, or they may advance the plot in their conversation, or whatever comes to you. The main thing is to get them talking.

If, by chance, your minor character begins to seem more important than you had thought, that's fine. Go with it. Write some more scenes with him or her in them. At this stage in your writing, one of the best things you can do is to follow sidetracks and go off on tangents. You may be surprised by what you discover.

5 Choose some character other than the main character—someone you'd like to know more about. You may use the minor character

above, or you may want to think about the villain of your novel or some other character. Write a monologue in which this character explores or explains himself or herself. Try to get inside that character's head, perhaps even draft the passage in first person as an internal monologue. One of the things novels do best is to offer nuanced portraits of people. Even terrorists and serial killers have explanations and excuses, hopes and disappointments. If your novel tells everyone's thoughts and feelings (the omniscient point of view), this monologue might be slipped into your work easily. It is more of a challenge, however, if your novel is in first person or if you are only telling the direct thoughts of the main character (third-person limited point of view).

After you've written the monologue,

BEFORE AND AFTER

A point-of-view challenge

Problem

In my novel *Oradell at Sea*, I had long sections set on a cruise ship, and the main character, Oradell, shared her table with a family neither she nor I liked very much. The father of the family was wealthy and rude; the daughter was pretty but sullen and rude; and the mother seemed like a complete stereotype of an affluent suburban matron who cared more about her diamond tennis bracelet than about her family. I eventually came to like the daughter, but I felt my writing about the mother was mean-spirited and thin.

I tried writing a monologue for this woman, to figure out what the world looked like to her. In writing the monologue, though, I got a new idea: The woman was on the cruise because she had been ill, but she felt her husband was taking her on the cruise instead of really trying to understand her.

This led me to ... a new problem: I now wanted to use the monologue material in my novel, but since the book sticks very closely to Oradell's point of view, I had to figure out how to get some of this material into the story.

Solution

I decided to let the two women have a drink together and start telling each other their life stories:

Oradell said, "I like pouring drinks for people. I should have gone to bartending school. That's another one of those missed opportunities. When I was first in New York, when Lance was just a little kid, there was a restaurant where I was working, and they needed a bartender, and they would have sent me to school at their expense. I don't remember why I wouldn't go. I didn't want to be away from Lance the extra hours and women didn't mix drinks so much back then." She glanced at Cathy, who had knocked back another and extended her glass for more.

Cathy said, "Our family's dysfunctional." She took a big suck of breath and leaned her head back against the plate glass. "I had cancer. I've done well, extremely well, remarkably well. I didn't

even have to have the whole operation. Just a lumpectomy."

Oradell blinked and held onto her drink. Conversations about breast cancer always made her want to leave the room. "That's tough, all right."

Cathy tapped a long finger down on the table. "But just the same, it was still cancer! It was an operation! And they didn't even notice." This time she poured her own drink, eyes brimming tears and flashing at the same time. "Did you see how Bill marched off when I started to cry in there? Like he didn't even see me? That's what they're both like—father and daughter. We're all like, I suppose. But the day after I got home from the hospital, Bill asked me if we could still host his partner's wedding supper. It was the man's fourth marriage!"

"I hope you told him to go to hell."

"I don't know why I'm telling you this. You don't know Bill. I wasn't surprised. Not a bit."

—M.S.W.



find a way to fit it, or at least parts of it, into your novel. Write a scene, perhaps, where the main character and the one with the monologue have a conversation. The monologist may blurt out loud what you had drafted as thoughts. The monologist could also write a letter or an e-mail or make a speech. In ordinary life, people do this all the time—give long monologues about themselves—and we listen. (See the Before and After sidebar, opposite page, for an example of the process.)

6 Write a scene where your main character has a dream that in some way advances the story.

That is, the dream might be a nightmare that frightens the main character into waking up and taking some action in the middle of the night. Or, perhaps the dream explains something to the main character. In my novels, I often make up dreams as a way into a character's psyche. It's not that I think dreams predict the future or have some absolute set of meanings, but rather that they sometimes have an inner consistency that is worth exploring in fiction—and in real life, too. It's a way of letting the character learn or explain something to herself or himself. At the same time, of course, as with monologues, it is a way for me to explore my characters. In *Oradell at Sea*, Oradell, who has had many losses in her life and thinks that she has completely left the mining camp where she grew up, has a dream about a gigantic dead miner:

When she thought of West Fork in conscious memory, it was green and damp or winter black with ice floes in the river. But in her dream, the weather was yellow and dry. In her dream a monstrous statue called the Dead Miner had toppled, and it filled the town like a Mount Rushmore giant. The Dead Miner had something to do with the Great West Fork Mine Explosion, which had happened long before she

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was born. In her dream, the Dead Miner lay in the middle of town. His heel was shoved into the mine portal, and one knee stuck up into the sky. His enormous face was downtown near the Company Store, turned towards the dreamer. It was yellow-brown, with dust on the cheeks and chunks like sleep matter in the corners of the eyes. Out of his great nostrils and eyes granules of sand trickled and gathered momentum as they

flowed. He grew larger as she watched, filling her dream vision, threatening to choke her with his crying sand.

She woke sucking for air and rearranged her pillows. The Dead Miner was her grandfather she never met. Or maybe he was her father, frozen stiff behind the Company Store. Or maybe he was her first husband, Mike Brown. Maybe he was all of the ones who died with no luck at all.

Oradell herself isn't sure what her dead miner stands for. He isn't a Symbol with a capital S, but rather something she is working on in her own mysterious way. The dream is meant to be significant within Oradell's world view, as a different side of her—she has it early in the novel when she has appeared so far as somewhat inebriated and garrulous. It is also a way for her to explore her own feelings and situation, not as a way of explaining the novel's theme or meaning.

7 Write a group of crucial scenes.

The final step is one that ought to give you enough material to write for many more of the sessions you've committed yourself to. Think of an archipelago—a little group of islands out in the ocean. They are really the tops of an under-ocean mountain range, usually not very far apart, and people used to use them as a way to make ocean voyages manageable by sailing or paddling from one to the next.

For this step, write an archipelago of scenes. Make a list, 1 to 5, and write

what you think are five very important scenes for your novel. You may have already thought of them. (The moment she finally realizes who did it! The big struggle on the balcony. Their first kiss.) If you haven't, that's OK; make up a few anyhow, even if you have to push yourself. Keep in mind that this is all tentative—you can always cut, add to and change them at a later time.

These scenes will be spread throughout your book. The point of calling it an archipelago is to think of the scenes as high points but also as a way to take little voyages of background material, narration and some less dramatic scenes and to go from one to the next.

At this point, you will probably have from 5 to 40 pages drafted, plus a list of several more scenes to draft. Don't worry about your writing style too much at this point. Rather, draft as much as you can, as rapidly as you can, paying attention to new ideas that might pop up and new directions that might deepen and broaden your story.

Enjoy your strenuous but exciting journey.

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RESOURCES

- **No Plot? No Problem** by Chris Baty, founder of National Novel Writing Month. Also, look for National Novel Writing Month online every November at www.nanowrimo.org.
- **Resources for Writers**, my Web page full of resources for writers, is at www.meredithsuewillis.com/resources.html.
- Two novels that demonstrate many of the techniques discussed in this article are **Appearances** by Joanne Greenberg (read a sample at www.montemayorpress.com/appearances.htm) and **View to the North** by Edith Konecky (read a sample at www.hamiltonstone.org/hsr4fiction.html#konecky).