

The Best Time to Outline

From "Strategy 6" in *Ten Strategies to Write Your Novel*

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 dee-tees 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 it very differently....