

Go Teen Writers
Write Your Novel

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STEPHANIE MORRILL, JILL WILLIAMSON,
& SHANNON DITTEMORE



Go Teen Writers: Write Your Novel

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To my parents, Steve and Beth Hines.

Thank you for instilling a love
of reading into me and for never
laughing when I said I wanted
to be a writer when I grew up.

-Stephanie Morrill

To Mrs. Parks and Mr. Parsons
for your encouragement and for
helping me believe that I could
do anything I set my mind to.

-Jill Williamson

To the teachers who encouraged
the storyteller in me: Mrs. Schroeder,
Ms. Stephan, Mr. Cimino, and Mr. Waugh.

-Shannon Dittmore

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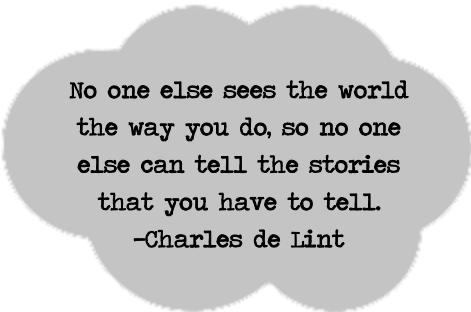
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No one else sees the world
the way you do, so no one
else can tell the stories
that you have to tell.
-Charles de Lint

Hey, Teen Writers!

We heard you want to write a novel. We so get that. Each of us have our own journeys of playing with stories. Some stories started in our heads as we daydreamed scenarios for characters. Some stories began as school assignments. Some stories came into existence because we sat down with a notebook and pencil and actively brainstormed ideas until we had a story to tell. Some stories fell into our minds, almost fully developed. Others were barely a wisp of an idea that we needed to chase and work hard to cultivate and grow.

We share all of that to illustrate to you the most important thing to remember in this process: There is no one right way to write a novel.

In case you didn't catch that, here it is again, so you don't miss it:

***THERE IS NO ONE RIGHT WAY
TO WRITE A NOVEL.***

It's true.

In your hands, you are holding a book that is crammed full of ideas and methods to help you write a strong first draft. Treat these ideas and methods as options to assist you, not rules that must be followed. Learning to write fiction well is a personal journey that is different for each and every writer. The three of us go about writing in very different ways, yet we've all managed to write stories that entertain our readers.

You must find your own way.

Now, figuring out what process works for you as a writer isn't

easy. It took the three of us time and a lot of effort to learn how to craft our own stories. We've all tried things that worked well and things that didn't work at all. It's our hope that this book will give you lots of options to try so that you can discover what works and what doesn't work for you. Once you figure that out, writing your stories will get a little easier and a lot more fun. That doesn't mean it won't take a lot of hard work. Writing a novel, just like any other art form or activity, takes practice. No one learns to compose great symphonies or perfect a golf swing in a few days. Respecting your dream of writing a novel means making the choice to invest time and effort and to make a commitment to learning and practicing the craft of writing.

Consider this the beginning of your apprenticeship. In this book, we, your mentors, will share with you some of the things we've learned that help us practice well.

Now, there is a lot of information in this book, and we don't want you to get overwhelmed. While some of you will likely read this whole book from beginning to end, we also structured it so that you can easily flip to sections where you feel you need extra help. Curious about world building for your fantasy novel? Flip to chapter thirteen. Struggling with a meandering middle? Flip back to chapter ten. Questioning your plot? Read up on story structure in chapters seven through eleven. Skipping around is just fine!

We hope *Go Teen Writers: Write Your Novel* is a book you keep near your writing space. We hope when you're thinking, "I wish I could talk to someone about this writing problem," that you'll think of us and flip through the pages. And if you don't find the answer you're looking for, we hope you'll hop on GoTeenWriters.com and search our archives.

If you find yourself sinking into overload or despair that this writing thing is just too hard, set this book aside and take a break. Or just simply write without worrying whether or not you're doing it the "correct" way. Like we said, there is no one right way to do this thing. What's important is that you write words—every day, if you can. You create consistently. You practice. Only by writing words, one at a time, will those words eventually add up into a novel. Only by writing words will you become a better writer.

With that in mind, you are ready to embark on your journey.

We are here, cheering you on. We believe in you. The stories you have to tell are precious. If you don't tell them, they will never be heard. So, grab your notebook or laptop, put on your creative cap, and let's write a novel.

Stephanie, Jill, and Shannon

INTRODUCTION

Get Your Head in the Game

You're Already a Writer

by Stephanie

You know there's nothing you'll read in this book that will make you a "real" writer, right?

While Jill, Shannon, and I certainly hope you'll exit these pages feeling like an *encouraged* writer, a *more knowledgeable* writer, a more *capable* writer— and many other adjectives—there's nothing we can say or do to make you a real writer.

You already are one.

You don't need a publisher's stamp of approval to be a real writer. You don't need to be able to point to your published book for proof of your skill. You just need to write. Writing makes you a real writer.

Part of being a writer is being a lifelong learner. That means you are always looking for ways to improve your craft. You can do this by practicing, by going to conferences and taking workshops, by participating in critique groups, and by reading books on the craft of writing, which means reading this book is one way you are already investing in your journey as a writer. Whether you've been a real writer all your life or you're just now discovering your desire to write stories, we're so glad this book found its way into your hands!

Being a writer is so much fun, but it can also be really hard. At some point, all writers have anxious moments where we doubt our skills and worry about failure and rejection. Also, writing can be lonely. That's why community is so important. Find a community of writers to encourage you—other writers who get it. That's what we've

worked hard to create at GoTeenWriters.com, and you are invited to join us there.

If you're going to impact the world by sharing the stories on your heart, you've got to practice believing in yourself. We want you to know that your words matter. Every day you write, you learn something new, you improve your craft, and invest in yourself as a person. If you believe in yourself, eventually others will too. It may take time, but belief leads to action, and action leads to skill. You are a writer, just like we are writers.

Welcome to the family.

You're Creating More Than Just a Story by Shannon

Writing a novel is a journey.

In fact, its multiple journeys traveled simultaneously. Storytelling can be spiritual and emotional, while being both physically and mentally challenging as well. As you move through the creative process, you will experience highs and lows that often mirror the quests of your favorite heroes.

While you may be tucked away in the safety and solitude of your writing cave, you will encounter dragons you don't know how to fight, and you will find mountains you've never been taught to scale. At times, it will feel impossible to reach the end of the road.

But I want to encourage you. When you sit down to write, you're not *just* meeting a quota. You're not *just* fighting to get words on the page. You're enduring. You're pushing through the fatigue. You're working when your body and mind says it's pointless. You're teaching yourself that *you can do hard things*.

This truth is something that cannot be gifted by external knowledge. As much as we'd like to, Jill, Steph, and I can't hand it to you. Nor can you absorb it by osmosis. You have to live it. You have to hit the wall so you can knock it down. You have to face monotony, so you can flex your muscles and turn it into the shimmering diamond of discipline.

You're in the process of creating an author, not *just* a story.

The daily writers, the deadline writers, the "I couldn't stop if I tried" writers; all of us have to develop endurance. It takes intention and time in seclusion (which might be the hardest part for some of you). But, like any discipline, if you continue on despite hardship, you will grow.

And there's this other truth too. One you must hold in tension with the grinding out of words. If you're doing the other part of your job as a writer—the living—those futile words you feel you're just throwing out there to meet some pre-established word count number? Those words might surprise you.

Living has a way of planting seeds in our souls. Seeds of truth and experience and philosophy. Seeds of conflict and angst and the kind of confusion that writers puzzle out best on the page.

Living has a way of infusing potential into words harvested even in the most barren of writing seasons. Writers who take living seriously fill their souls with so many rich moments that when they're forced to dig deep, they're just as likely to pull up a prize-winning cabbage as they are a dreary, miserable weed.

There will be days when you enter your cave feeling anything but brilliant, but push through. Fight. Harvest words. Get them on the page. When you return to them, you may be impressed with what landed there. Maybe not. Maybe this sentence and that were about producing endurance.

But *this* sentence? Maybe this one is worth holding onto. Maybe this one is worth examining more closely. And you never would have written it if you hadn't flexed those writing muscles, dug deep, and pushed through when phantom voices were telling you to give up.

Hear me, friend. When you sit down to write, you're not just sculpting a beginning, middle, and end. You're building something much more powerful. You're creating a storyteller.

And *that* is worth a little hardship.

Because storytellers change the world.

Writing Fiction vs. Writing for School

by Jill

My first year working in a public school brought to light many differences in how authors write fiction compared to how students write for school assignments. I asked my fourth graders, “How many sentences does a paragraph have?” They were quick to answer: “Five!” They had learned this about writing academic essays and it stuck.

Academic writing tends to follow a strict format. If your teacher gives you a writing assignment and asks for five-sentence paragraphs, then you write five-sentence paragraphs. I’m not looking to make a rebel of you in regards to your school assignments. However, in fiction—and even in nonfiction or poetry—a paragraph can be as long or as short as you want it to be. It’s true.

To prove it to you, I pulled my Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary off the shelf and looked up the definition of the word *paragraph* and found this definition: “a subdivision of a written composition that consists of one or more sentences, deals with one point or gives the words of one speaker, and begins on a new indented line.”

One or more sentences. Which means that one sentence can be a paragraph.

Wow, right?

This was hard for my fourth graders to accept when we started a narrative writing unit. They had worked hard to remember the rules for essays, so it took some time for them to form new habits in regard to writing fiction. But creative writing, whether it be fiction or creative nonfiction, is artistic. You use words, punctuation, and formatting to draw in a reader and affect them emotionally. That is your art form, and with art, there are no rules. Not really.

Sure, we’ll talk about many “writing rules” in this book, but the thing about these rules is that you need only to learn them so that you understand how to more powerfully communicate to readers. Once you understand the “writing rules,” you can choose to break those rules on purpose for the sake of your own artistic choices.

Many teachers and college professors might tell you that learning

to write quality fiction is not important—that to do well in school you must learn academic writing alone. This is true to a certain extent. To succeed in college, you must pass classes in which you will be assigned plenty of academic writing. I would argue, however, that writers who understand story and character motivation, understand readers. And writers who understand readers are better academic writers than those who don't understand readers.

As an example, I had to write a thesis to earn my master's degree, and because I was already a novelist, writing it came easily. Yes, I had to learn APA format and citations and how to write a literature review, but my being a novelist not only enabled me to draw readers into my academic writing, it made that academic writing easier to write.

Beyond the freedom of paragraph length, you will find many other ways that writing fiction is different from academic writing. You don't need to provide a thesis statement or research question when writing fiction, but you will want to introduce a character with a goal. While in academic writing, you may quote multiple people in one paragraph, but in fiction, you need to divide the dialogue (and sometimes the thoughts and actions) of different characters into separate paragraphs. Academic writing cites facts and research. Fiction spins a story with emotion and feeling, description, action, and dialogue.

So, as you read this book and start writing fiction, I ask you to keep an open mind and commit to learning how to write powerful fiction as its own genre of writing. If you're ever in doubt, pick up a beloved novel from your bookshelf and study it. Reading fiction can teach you everything you need to know about writing fiction, so gather a couple mentor texts and keep them handy so you can refer to them as you're learning. It's time to get creative and play with words. That's part of what makes writing fiction so fun.

Make Space for Writing

by Stephanie

If you're like most writers, you don't need help feeling excited about your story idea. Not in the beginning, anyway.

There's a part of writing a story that comes easy to you, that feels like pure fun. For me, it's always been story beginnings. For you, it might be creating characters, outlining a series, or worldbuilding majestic fantasy landscapes.

Whatever the fun, easy part is for you, that's the part you don't need help with. Yes, you'll evolve and grow in that aspect of the craft over time, but you don't need instructions on how to get that piece of the novel done. You're already snatching every second you can find to work on it.

But what happens when it's time to move beyond that part? Or when you notice some problems with your idea or what you've written? How do you keep going after that initial spark of passion fades?

Starting is easy. Finishing is hard.

You know this already.

You feel more excited about goals on day one than you do on day one hundred. It's no different with creative work. Energy and enthusiasm for your novel are high early on, but they fade long before the completion of a first draft. Forget about those emotions sustaining you through edits, submitting to agents, or marketing the finished product. You have to develop something deeper, more substantial, to get your story that far.

This is similar to the emotions you experience when you first start dating someone versus what you need to create a long-term, healthy, happy marriage. That early energy for the other person is fun, easy, and exciting. But fun, easy, and exciting can't be the bedrock of a marriage, nor can it be what you count on to get to The End of your novel.

Make Space for Writing

The first way I know to combat the waning enthusiasm when the sheen wears off a new idea is to have a place and a time to write. The importance of this step is easy to overlook because when we first start a new project, our idea consumes our thoughts. We snag every second we can to work.

When that fades, though, what saves me every time is my routine. “I’m going to work on my book when I have time,” isn’t nearly as powerful as, “I’m going to work on my book every weekend morning at my favorite coffeehouse from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m.”

With a statement like that, not only have you declared that you want to work on your book, you’ve also thought through what that will actually look like. You can put that on your calendar whereas “when I have time” doesn’t plug into a timeslot very well.

Picking a routine you can stick to is more important than weighing yourself down with ideas like “real writers write everyday” or all the various writing challenges that exist. (To be clear, I’m not knocking either of these ideas, just saying they’re tools meant to help you, not to weigh you down with false ideas of what it means to be a failure or success.)

Over the last 15 years my routines have evolved:

When I worked full-time: *I’ll get up an hour before work and write.*

When I worked part-time: *On my days off, I’ll write from 8am to lunch.*

When I had the luxury of not working and didn’t yet have children: *When Ben leaves for work, I’ll start writing. I’ll stop when he gets home.*

And currently: *When my kids are at school or I have childcare, I’ll write for the first half of my scheduled time.* (The other half is devoted to other writing responsibilities, like social media, managing GoTeenWriters.com, replying to emails, etc.)

Taking my routine seriously has not only multiplied my words, but it’s also led those around me to respect my writing time because they see *me* respect my writing time. Yes, it can feel awkward to pass up invitations because of writing—even after you cross into writing

professionally—but I’ve learned that I can’t wait for others to prioritize my time, identify what matters to me, or give me permission to create. Those are my responsibilities.

Another bonus to setting boundaries on your writing time? You can feel complete freedom to say YES to invitations that fall outside of those boundaries. Or you can watch Netflix guilt-free because there won’t be a voice whispering that you should really be writing. (Or if you do hear that negative voice, you can say to it, “No, I shouldn’t. I write on my lunch break every day. I’m free to do other things right now.”)

So, if you want to finish your novel, this is where I would start: Identify your butt-in-chair, fingers-on-keyboard time.

To the writer who says, “But I want to write when I feel inspired,” I say, “Yeah, me too. But I’ve learned sitting in my chair, opening my manuscript, and getting to work is a great way to encourage inspiration along.”

I can’t promise inspiration will show her face every time you’re faithful to your writing routine, but I *can* promise that more times than not, opening the document and getting through those first couple sentences will be the hardest part. Once I’ve cleared that hurdle, I’m often reminded of my enthusiasm for the story and happy to be writing, and I think you’ll find the same is true for you.

Make it Yours:

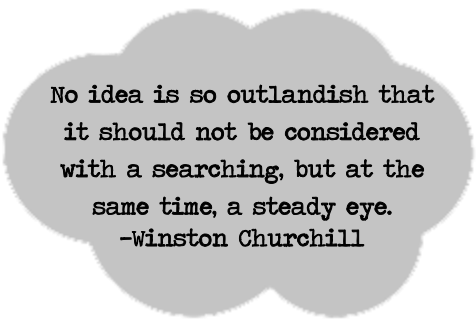
1. What’s a writing time that you can commit to? If writing consistently is new to you, consider starting small. Having a month where you write faithfully once a week and then gradually increase it to two times a week is way better than committing to write every day and burning out.

2. Write down your time in whatever you use to track your schedule or to-do list.

3. Consider having somebody hold you accountable.

PART ONE

Pre-writing



No idea is so outlandish that
it should not be considered
with a searching, but at the
same time, a steady eye.
-Winston Churchill

1 The Idea

Brainstorming Story Ideas by Jill

People are always asking me, “Where do you get your ideas?” Honestly, ideas are everywhere. Just look around you and flip on that imagination. See someone wearing cheetah print leggings? They could be a shapeshifter struggling to stay fully shifted. Signs of a mouse in the classroom? Perhaps he becomes a school mascot. And what about that winding trail that leads off the end of the park? Could be it leads to a magical world.

I get a lot of ideas like these. Shiny, new, and eager to distract me from what I should be doing. If an idea comes and I like it, I write it down and stick it in my ‘Idea’ folder. If I *love* the idea, I might start a separate story folder. That way, should more ideas for this story come to me, I’ll have a place to put them. Sometimes nothing ever comes of these ideas. Sometimes these ideas turn into books. And sometimes I end up smashing several ideas into one story. That’s why it’s important to keep all your ideas. You never know when one might be useful in

the future.

Other than the random ideas that pop into my head, I also have a wide variety of strategies for brainstorming story ideas or for taking a nugget of an idea and growing it into something more substantial. Let's look more closely at some of those strategies.

Search your life.

Many people start writing because they have something to say that comes from their life experiences. So look at your life. Look for common themes or knowledgeable areas and see what you come up with. Some examples from my life are: growing up in Alaska, living without electricity or running water, coming from a poor family, hustling for my worth, studying fashion design, and playing basketball. Besides themes or knowledgeable areas, you can also write about specific events that happened to you, like when I went to Japan one summer as an exchange student. Or maybe you know a lot about horses, so you could write a book in which horses play a major role. Dig deep and see what interesting things your life has to offer. You might be surprised.

What if . . . ?

Asking the simple “what if” question can lead to great ideas. This is the trick I used to come up with the idea for my book *Replication: The Jason Experiment*. I was riding in a car in upstate New York. We passed orchards and farms for miles. As I was gazing out the window at the scenery, I thought, “*What if there was a farm that grew people? Clones. It could be called Jason Farms.*” That was all it took. I could not stop thinking about this idea until I wrote the story.

Meld the familiar with the strange.

In his book *On Writing*, Stephen King shares a way of coming up with ideas by combining two unrelated things. He takes something well-known and pairs it with something odd—something that doesn't

naturally fit with that first, well-known thing. The example he gives in his book is: Murder and mayhem + prom = Stephen's book *Carrie*. Play around with this idea. See if you can take a concept that an audience understands very well, then combine it with something completely different.

Opposites attract.

This idea takes Stephen King's idea of combining unrelated things a step further. Look for two things that would normally never be together and put them together. You could do this with character archetypes who don't usually work together, like a liar and a nun, or a bully and a teacher. Or you could meld two character archetypes into one, like writing about a cowardly thief. You could do opposites with actors, like putting Arnold Schwarzenegger in a movie with Shirley Temple. You can use this concept with authors, books, or movies, as well. Or mix and match them. For example: *Romeo and Juliet* as written by Douglas Adams or The Doctor goes to Narnia or *Redeeming Love* in a prison. You could also take the opposite of a stereotype like they did in the movie *Liar Liar*, which tells the story of a lawyer who cannot tell a lie. You could do this with a retelling like in the movie *Hook*: Peter Pan has finally grown up. You could also do this with genres, like writing a fantasy novel that's also a mystery, or a science fiction novel that's also a romance. The options are endless.

Follow the map.

The idea of following a map from point A to point B is a simple way to tell a story. The hero starts at one place on a map and must travel across it to achieve something. *The Hobbit* is the perfect example of a follow-the-map story. All you need is a map, a character to travel, and something that character needs.

Retell a story.

This is when you either take the plot structure from a well-known story and tell it your own way, or you take classic characters from a

well-known story and tell another part of their story. Fairy tales, classics, history, and stories from mythology are the biggest examples of this type of storytelling. Readers love them because they're familiar and bring about nostalgia. Keep in mind, an author can only use parts of another story if that story is in the public domain. To publish a story that is under copyright protection is infringement. This is illegal, unless you're writing fan fiction for fun with no intention of publishing. So, if you want to write a retelling, you must do your research. I've included in the Extras section a list of authors whose work is public domain. To learn more about copyright laws and when a book enters the public domain, read this post: GoTeenWriters.com/publicdomain.

Make it Yours:

1. Search your life for ideas, themes, and events that might make, or contribute to, an interesting story. Make a list of at least five things.

2. Come up with an interesting What if . . . ? question that might make an intriguing story.

3. Find two unrelated or opposite events, concepts, character archetypes, genres, or movies to meld into a story idea.

4. Brainstorm reasons a character might follow a map. What could he or she be seeking at that final destination?

5. Look at the list of public domain stories in the Extras section. Choose one to play around with. Would you retell it? Or would you write a new story for one of the characters?

How Many Story Ideas Could You Come Up With In One Week?

by Stephanie

Not long ago, I realized that I have a lot of story ideas that I dismiss immediately.

I'll feel a bit of curiosity about a topic or a question, and I'll allow myself about 30 seconds to ponder "What if?" but then I start shutting the idea down with thoughts like:

"But that couldn't be a YA story. I'm a YA writer."

"That's not the right historical era."

"I don't write fantasy. I can't write that book."

Recently I caught myself doing this when listening to a podcast about a pharmaceutical crisis in the 1950s. There was a woman at the FDA who was new to her job but stood up to the executives at a big pharmaceutical company, putting pressure on them, and it prevented disaster for the United States. Pretty cool story. But practically as soon as a fictitious adaptation formed in my head, I was already thinking, "Nope, that's about adults. I don't write for adults. And haven't stories about big pharmaceutical companies been done to death already?"

Why do I do that?

Why do I shut down story ideas before I even get a coherent thought together? Once I became aware of this bad habit, I set out to stop it. For one week, I actively looked for ideas and didn't censor them. Here were my rules:

- I must like the idea. It must sound like a legit idea that I would enjoy writing.
- It must be its own book idea, not an addition to an idea I've already had.

At the end of the week, I wound up with four "story sparks," which I found exciting. There was nothing so amazing that I thought, "I have to stop everything I'm doing right now and WRITE THIS BOOK," but

I felt good about the ideas I came up with. Give it a try!

Make it Yours:

For one week, actively brainstorm new ideas without censoring yourself. The only parameters are that you like the ideas, they're the kind of ideas you could see yourself writing, and that they must be ideas for new stories. Write down whatever pops into your head, and at the end of the week, see what you've come up with.

Story Matchmaking Exercise

by Stephanie

Here's another exercise for coming up with new story ideas. This one gives you a way to mix and match your ideas into one. Here's how it works:

Think of stories you love from all genres and all types of media. These could be short stories, book series, TV shows, musicals, whatever you want.

Write down the titles on individual note cards. If you want, you can stop there, but I also made notecards for a few settings I'm drawn to, several historical eras, and a handful of characters I love.

Then you mix up the cards, draw two at random, and try to make connections and build a story idea.

When I did this, my first draw was a tough one: *Heist Society*, a YA series by Ally Carter; and *30 Rock*, the sitcom with Tina Fey. I stared at these for a bit, feeling baffled, and then pulled another card to add to the mix. This one was a setting card "on a train." That helped get me going. Maybe a story about a traveling vaudeville act, but really they're thieves? That could be interesting.

Once you have an idea, you set aside those cards and draw a new set.

Some combos that you draw won't be helpful at all (like when the two cards I pulled were "1920s" and "1940s"), but you also might land on some really great ideas that you wouldn't have thought of

otherwise.

Committing to an Idea

by Shannon

The first thing you need before any real progress can be made writing your story is commitment. You must commit to an idea.

I'm very rarely writing more than one story at a time. In fact, I'm so bad at working on two projects simultaneously, that I do my very best to ignore any new story idea that comes knocking while I'm immersed in a manuscript that needs finishing. If an idea won't leave me alone, I allow myself a few minutes to dictate the idea into an email, then I save it in my 'Drafts' folder. Currently, there are sixteen ideas hanging out in my folder, waiting on me.

The simple act of saying or typing the idea out and tucking it away frees me to focus on whatever it is that I'm supposed to be completing. Because here's the thing: if we're going to grow as an author, we really do have to finish what we start. Finishing is important.

When the time *does* come for me to select a new project, my 'Drafts' folder is the first place I look. At this point, I'm fairly void of ideas. I've emptied all my words into the last project and am needing the energy of a bright, shiny idea to tempt me from my exhaustion.

The honest truth is this: the answer is rarely in my 'Drafts' folder. I can't speak for every writer out there, but for me, those ideas that set about pestering me when I was working away on one project came along for one reason: to distract me. To keep me from actually finishing what I set out to do. While some of the ideas had promise, they've been hanging out in the back of my head so long they've lost their shine.

It's unfair to them, I'm sure, to banish them to my 'Drafts' folder, but I'm not the same writer I was when those ideas initially appealed to me. I've written myself into a new place. I've grown. And I'm ready for an idea that fits the new me.

In most cases, the idea I commit to comes while I'm taking time away from the keyboard. The idea usually arrives with a vivid image and a WHAT IF question that needs answering.

While the circumstances surrounding a first novel are always a little unique, I committed to my debut, *Angel Eyes*, only after the image of a halo captured my attention and refused to let go. And then the question: *What if we could see the invisible?*

Even then, even after I had the image and the question, I can't say I was completely sold on the idea. At that moment, I would have told you that, "Yes! This is it! This is my golden idea!" But, really, REALLY, one night's excitement about an idea is not commitment. Commitment happens only after you've hit a few roadblocks and fought your way through. Like any relationship, pushing on despite adversity means you've landed on something that might be worth keeping.

As I write this, I'm currently in this place with a fantastically tempting idea. I'm all in. At least I think I am. I WANT this to be the one. I've written a thousand words on this project and though I'm not at all impressed, I'm not dissuaded. I haven't ruined the idea for myself. I still have a desire to puzzle my way through this question, and I want to know more about the image haunting me.

So, in a few days' time, maybe a few weeks, I'll know. This idea and I will date. We'll dance a bit. We'll argue some too (because in every good relationship there are disagreements) and if, after all that, I am still excited about this idea, I will accept its proposal. I'll commit. And for as long as it takes me to complete it, I will do my very best to stay all in.

There will be hard times. There will be days when I get it wrong. When my characters talk back. When my storyworld folds in on itself. When my magic system backfires. There will be days when I want to give up and try out that striking new idea flashing across my mind.

That's why I take my time with an idea up front. I don't commit right away. I stew and I think and I scribble and when, at last, I know it's chosen me? That's the moment I'm all in.

Make it Yours:

Have you committed fully to one story? Or do you have several ideas pulling at you, all demanding your attention? It's time to choose, friend. Pick the one that feels right, commit to it, and file the rest into a 'Drafts' folder where they won't be able to distract you from the important work of finishing.

Which Story Should You Write?

by Stephanie

What if you're all for Shannon's idea of committing to one story to work on, but you have no idea how to pick the best one? If you're not under contract or facing a real deadline, how do you know which idea you should be chasing? How do you pick that one thing to focus on?

There are no hard-and-fast rules for this, and ultimately you get to decide what ideas are worth your investment of time, but here are four things to consider when trying to choose:

Which idea feels most fun?

This does *not* mean that you'll feel excited every single moment you're working with the idea. It's nice when that happens, but it's not very realistic. My son often drags his feet when it's time to get ready for baseball practice, but when he's actually there, he has a lot of fun. That's what you're measuring. When you work on different ideas, which one brings you the most joy?

Does this idea align with “the writer you want to be”?

(And if not, are you okay with that?)

In 2014, Shannon taught me a really important question to ask myself: *What kind of writer do I want to be?*

This question delves into basic things like genre choices, but also deeper issues like measuring success, caring for your health, or deciding on your pace.

I frequently have ideas—for stories, promotions, etc.—that don't quite fit the writer I want to be for a variety of reasons. I view this the same way I do when the random red tulip pops up in my landscaping. The previous owners planted it, and when spring arrives, there comes that lone red tulip. It's a beautiful tulip ... but it doesn't really belong there with the shrubbery and grass.

As a gardener, I get to ask “Do I want to plant more tulips so that it belongs, or do I want to cut this one and take it inside to enjoy privately?” As a writer, you get to ask the same thing about those random ideas that don't quite fit your brand or your budget. Do you want to expand who you are as a writer? Do you want to save this idea for later? Do you want to write it just for you?

**Does this idea have potential to be a great story
that others would want to read?**

You may not literally sit down and ask these questions every time, but they should be on your mind if writing is going to be your career:

- Does this story have a compelling main character?
- Is the plot interesting and unique?
- Is my setting intriguing?
- Is my theme something I'm passionate about?
- How would I pitch this novel to an agent or editor?

Which is often the same or similar to the question:

- How would I market this book?

Those specifics are critical for making good decisions about what projects to pursue.

If you could write only one more story...

I don't remember where I saw James Scott Bell say this, nor do I remember exactly how this writing exercise goes (sorry, JSB!), but the essence is this:

1. If you could only write one more story in your lifetime, what would it be?
2. Write that story.

Sometimes that question is a bit too loaded to be helpful, but at other times it really crystallizes what book feels most urgent to me. I'll think something like, "While these other ideas sound fun, *this* is what I would pick if I could only write one." That's how I ended up writing *The Lost Girl of Astor Street*, even though I wasn't technically a historical writer yet.

Also, this isn't a forever relationship

Not to totally contradict everything I just said about finishing projects and devoting yourself to one thing, but the good thing about picking a story idea is that it's not a "Til death do us part" commitment.

Sometimes we let the decision to work on an idea feel too heavy and permanent, which leads to indecision, when it would be better to just pick a direction and see where it goes. If you make a decision, but a week from now you regret it, you can just put that idea away for a while and pull out a different one until you find one that feels right.

Make it Yours:

If you're struggling to decide which story to write, ask yourself the following questions and see where it leads you.

1. Which idea feels most fun?

2. Does this idea align with "the writer you want to be"? (And if not, are you okay with that?)

3. Does this idea have potential to be a great story that others would want to read?

4. If you could only write one more story, which story would it be?

Genre and Audience

by Jill

When you're writing a book, it can be a good idea to know what genre and for what audience you are writing. Do you have to know this ahead of time? Not always. It certainly can be helpful, however. Because at some point, if you want to sell your book, you will need to be able to communicate to an editor, an agent, or a customer what kind of book you've written and who you hope will read it.

A genre is simply the category your story fits into. Sometimes this is a main category, like romance, fantasy, or mystery. Other times it might be a subgenre, like historical romance, epic fantasy, or cozy mystery.

The audience is the age group of your reader. If you are writing for children, keep in mind that kids like to read about characters who are older than they are. This means the age of your protagonist should be a few years older than those who will read the book. So, if you're writing for middle grade, which is geared toward readers ages 8–12, your main character should be thirteen or fourteen. If you're writing for young adults aged 12–16, your main character should be sixteen or seventeen. If you're writing for adults, your main characters should be adults.

I meet many writers who aren't sure whether they are writing a middle grade book or a young adult book. Beyond the age of the character, which you could easily change, look at the situations the characters are dealing with in the story. The conflicts your characters are dealing with should fit the interests and conflicts of your target readers. Most ten-year-old readers aren't interested in romance, so

romance doesn't belong in middle grade beyond an innocent crush or lots of blushing. Teens are often dealing with more serious issues like identity and purpose. Sometimes, it's all in how you handle the issue which makes your story middle grade or young adult. My best advice is to read lots of both until you know where your story best fits.

I struggled with genre when I first started out. I was writing for teens. That much I knew. My book had “weird” elements, though, and I wasn't certain how to define them. It was an adventure story... but it was also about spies. Did that make it a mystery? Yeah. That was it. I was writing a teen mystery. But what about the “weird” part? Did the “weird” make it a paranormal mystery? What about urban fantasy or supernatural? Were those subgenres a better fit? I didn't know. And it took me a LONG TIME to figure out.

Eventually, I did have to buckle down and choose, so I put it where I felt it fit best, which was young adult mystery. To this day, that is a hard book to sell because it's so unique. Keep in mind, too unique of a story might make it difficult for you to find a publisher—or your readers, if you indie publish. That doesn't mean you shouldn't write the story—that's something only you can decide—but it might mean that your story will be hard to sell later on.

What has helped me since that tricky story is to think about where I might find my book if it was for sale in a bookstore. On what shelf would it be placed? Young adult fantasy? Thrillers? Middle grade mystery? That's how you ultimately decide.

Make it Yours:

What genre is your story? For what age group? If you're not sure, ask yourself where your book would be placed in a bookstore.

Prewriting

by Jill

In academic writing, prewriting is usually a form of outlining or making a plan before you write. In fiction, prewriting can be that as well, but it's usually much more. Prewriting is a way to get to know the

characters and the place in which your story will happen. Not every author practices prewriting, and it may or may not be a good fit for you. Let's take a look at some different types of prewriting and how each could help you prepare to write your story.

Brainstorming

This is when you sit down and make lists for different parts of your story, like traits for characters or towns, rules for your magic system, or scene ideas for your plot. If you find yourself stuck, brainstorming can be a good way to get writing again.

Free Writing

This is when you sit down and start writing about your story. Let the muse whisk you away. You could write from one character's point of view or your own, as a narrator, explaining the story to the reader. Whatever works to get the words flowing. As you free write, you will discover many new things about your characters and your story.

Backstory

Writing a made-up history for your characters and your storyworld can be a useful way to learn about and gain a better understanding of both. When I write backstories, I tend to do them one at a time. I'll write one for a certain character. Then I'll write one for my storyworld. I might also write one for a specific nation or city.

For my *Mission League* series, I wrote a historical backstory for the founding of The Mission League organization. It never went into any of the books and was strictly to help me know where the organization came from and how it worked so my characters could discuss it now and then. I also wanted to make sure that my main character descended from some of the original founders, which meant I needed to create some original founders to talk about.

When I write character backstories, they often start out like life histories. "I was born in Michigan. My parents moved to Alaska when

I was five. I'm the oldest of five kids. I grew up in a house with no electricity or running water," and so on. These can be a neat way to get to know your characters better, and they can sometimes inspire you with new ideas.

Interviews

Similar to writing a backstory for your characters, you can interview them. Ask your characters questions and write down how they respond. This helps your characters come to life, which helps you get to know them better, which makes them much easier to write. Pretend you're a talk show host. Start with just the facts of the current story: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? Once you know what happened in the story, you can dig deeper to learn more. What your characters say might surprise you. In the Extras section, we have a list of sample questions you can ask your characters.

Story Synopsis

The synopsis is a one- to two-page, single spaced document that tells an overview of your story. When you're ready to try and sell your novel, you'll need a synopsis, however, writing a synopsis can be a helpful prewriting activity. Many writers write one of these before starting their novel to use as a writing guide. If you're writing a synopsis to pitch your story, it needs to match your finished book. In the prewriting process, however, your synopsis doesn't have to be perfect and might very well change as you discover your story. There are also some writers who wait to write their synopsis until they have a rough draft of their novel completed. At that point, going back and writing out the play-by-play of what happened in your story can help you see where there are holes, and help you stay on track as you rewrite.

Research and References

When I first started writing, I never thought I would need to do research. Boy, did I ever! In *By Darkness Hid*, my first novel, I needed

to study sword fighting, how to use natural plants for healing, and how to skin and cook a wild bird!

Whether I researched these topics online, by reading nonfiction books, or by interviewing an expert, every time I took notes. Afterward, I would write a page or two of information about each activity to help me remember. This not only helped me better understand these topics, it created a document I could refer back to when I needed to remember the details.

Another prewriting activity I use a lot is making reference lists. When I wrote the book *Thirst*, I did some prewriting on my fictional HydroFlu disease, how Comet Pulon worked, and how the comet infected the earth's drinking water. I also kept forgetting what kind of vehicle each character was driving, so I made a page that listed the different types of vehicles and who was riding where. For *By Darkness Hid*, I made a list of healing herbs and what they could be used for to help me remember what Vrell had in her satchel and how she could use it when people needed help. In this book, I also created a cheat sheet for my made-up foreign language, complete with translations, so when it came time to write more magic spells, I was ready and didn't have to recreate it each time.

Miscellaneous Materials

Maps, floorplans, timelines, and calendars can also be a type of prewriting. Anything that helps you visually see or keep track of your story can be a valuable tool. I create calendars for every book I write. There are plenty of online free printable blank calendars that you can use to track the scenes in your story and get a better idea of how much time has passed. Maps and floorplans can give you a better idea of the place where your characters are living and traveling.

The point of prewriting is to get you ready to start writing the book. I find this important because it helps me better know my character, my storyworld, and the necessary elements I'm going to use in this tale. It also ensures that when I finally do sit down to write, I will be able to forge ahead without needing to stop to look things up. Sure, I'll still have to do that occasionally, but if I can prewrite and

prepare, I won't need to stop nearly as much, which makes writing that first draft a little easier.

Make it Yours:

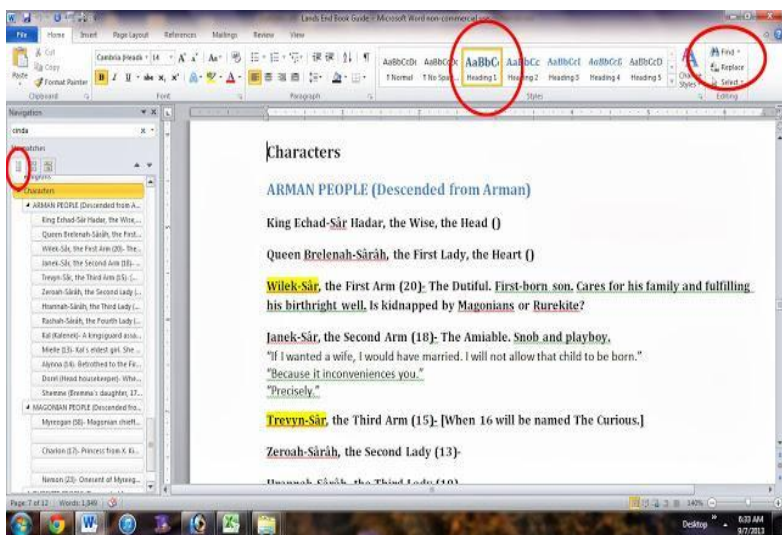
1. Take some time to free write about a character or your storyworld. Ask your character questions. If you're writing about a place, ask your character what that place is like.
2. Try writing a synopsis for your story.
3. Print out a blank monthly calendar and fill in the scenes of your story to see the overall timeline.

How to Keep Track of Everything

by Jill

I'm a bit of a packrat. I also really like paper. So, I have a habit of accruing piles of stuff when I'm working on a story. If I just left all of that "stuff" in piles, I would never be able to find anything when I needed it. That's why I keep a story bible, which is a three-ring binder that I use to keep all the different papers I collect for my story. This might include any of the following: character charts, map and floorplan sketches, prewriting, calendars and timelines, reference lists, translations, lists of magical rules, family trees, research, prophecies for my story, songs or mottos, flags for different countries, country charts, city charts, drawings of creatures, sketches of swords or costumes, etc. This way, when I need something, I can quickly find it.

I also use book guides, which I create in Microsoft Word and divide into sections using headers. These are handy because Word's "find" function makes it much easier to find something than leafing through a massive binder. I can put all the same information into this Word book guide as I put into a three-ring binder. I can even paste in images from the internet of my setting or characters. (You can also do this using Google Docs, which is free.)



I create sections for things like history, setting, magic, religions, plot, and characters—anything I want. I format these section titles as Heading 1. Then I can make sub-headings in each section and type in whatever information I want to remember. I can easily click between headings in the “navigation menu” on the left, shown in the image above. The circle in the middle shows you where to change the heading types. The circle on the right shows you where to click on “Find” to bring up the navigation menu, which will appear on the left-hand side of the document. The circle on the left shows you where to click to browse the headings in your document.

These aren’t the only ways to keep track of the important details in your story. Another thing I like to do is make a Pinterest board for my projects. That way I can pin images for inspiration or websites for research so that I can easily find it again. This is also a fun way to let my readers see what I’m up to before my book is published.

Some authors also enjoy Wikidpad, which allows you to create a Wikipedia-like file for your book where you can link between articles. Scrivener is another popular choice for writing and planning your story. It has an index card feature that allows you to brainstorm. The important thing is to choose some way of keeping track of your

information so that once you're writing, you don't have to stop and waste time looking for things. When everything is in one place, writing is a lot easier.

Make it Yours:

Choose one of the ideas above and create a place where you can keep track of your information. Once you've created the place, fill it with everything you need to tell your story.

