

How to kick-start your novel: beat the dreaded 'Blank Page Syndrome'

"I'd love to write a novel but I just don't know how to start. Yet I've got loads of ideas!"

How often have you heard someone say that or something like it?



The first thing I'd say is "Don't think you have to write your novel in one huge burst of effort and imagination. Writing a novel isn't a sprint - it's a marathon. "

Remember that your first shot at setting up your novel isn't the last. Quite simply, your first attempt just might not work, or at best might need a few tweaks to correct it. You may even have to discard all of what you've got so far and start over again. However, the approach I'm suggesting means that if it's the latter case, what you throw away is a spoonful and not a whole bathtub of water.

You may already have a good idea of your story or you may be starting from scratch. Either way, try this. Focus on these three questions:

1. Who is your Main Character (MC)?
2. What does your main MC want?
3. What stops your MC from getting what they want?

Answer these three questions and you have the bare bones of your story - your novel.

So before we go any further I suggest you get a blank sheet of paper or open a Word document and write your answers to questions 1, 2 and 3.

Next up. Well, this depends on your preferred approach to writing a story. You've probably heard the terms 'Planner' and 'Pantsers' already. But just for the record, Planners like to know as much as possible about their story before they start the actual writing. Pantsers - well, they don't. They fly by the seat of their pants and simply start writing and keep on writing.

Personally, I think most writers don't slot into one or other category. I believe the distinctions are more on a spectrum rather than a plain 'either/or' extreme.

PLANNER

PANTSER

For example, in my own case I veer towards the Planner end of the spectrum, probably with 70%/30% split. Think about this - do you have a feel for your position on this line. Knowing your preferred approach will help you avoid straitjacketing yourself in your writing or at the other extreme, flailing around hopelessly lost; directionless.

By questioning your own preferred style of writing in terms of 'planning' versus 'pantsing', you can now expand on those first three basic questions in a way that is compatible with the writing approach you're most comfortable with. (Yes, I know I've finished that sentence with a preposition but so what! Remember what Churchill once wrote while making his point. 'That is something up with which I will not put.')

So, let's expand on the three central questions. (There are others!)

1. MC.

Write a short narrative about your MC. Not a flat, chronological biography but as if you were describing them to a close friend who will respect your confidentiality. In other words, describe your MC "warts and all". Their good points, flaws, likes and dislikes, hang-ups and admirable qualities. You might say something about their physical appearance, gender, age, social and educational background, work history, current profession, love life, ambitions and hopes for the future. You probably won't use all of this but you're getting to know your MC. Drop in a few question marks, leave some gaps - doing so allows your story to 'breathe' and allows the opportunity for you to adjust aspects of your MC to make your story work better as you write it.

2. MC's Want

As you paint a picture of your MC, keep in mind the 'Want' you've given them. Why is this important? Because if they are to achieve what they want and fight all those battles ahead to get it, well, you must ask has your MC got the temperament, personality and resources to succeed? Or it may be your story is about their failure - but be wary, readers like to empathise with the MC, travel with them on their journey, most times root for them - a satisfying outcome for the MC after a series of tough struggles is also a satisfying story for your reader.

3. Obstacles to success

No, we haven't yet mentioned the 'villain', the MC's antagonist. Now it's time to nail this character. A great story must have conflict and the most common conflict is that between your MC and the antagonist. Of course there can be other obstacles, physical impediments, psychological blocks to your MC's progress - but your antagonist's attempts to thwart your MC are central. Remember, don't throw just a single obstruction in the path of your MC, have a series, each tougher than the previous building up to a major confrontation - the biggest battle of all, the climax.

Now write the character profile for your antagonist like you did for your MC (protagonist)
The End. Final battle fought, journey over, job done.

Well, not quite. After all the mayhem and mess there must be a clear up. So the final step is to tie up the loose ends in your novel, allow your MC to take a deep breath - and prepare for a new journey - your next novel.