

RWR

ROMANCE WRITERS REPORT

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Why Plotting Is Good For Business

Write Your Christmas-Romance TV-Movie Script Today!

“Let’s Start at the Very Beginning...”

Finding Your Why, What, and When For NaNoWriMo

Next Steps After NaNoWriMo (Even if You Don’t Get To 50,000 Words)

National Novel Writing Month: The Most Fun You’ll Ever Have Writing . . . Really

The Yeah, Buts, Yoda, and Marian the Librarian

A Writer’s Voice, Part 1—Or, I Know It When I Hear It

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Contributors

Diana Georgelos

Diana is in the process of writing her first book. To develop her craft, she has taken over a thousand writing classes including many on the topic of plotting. When not writing, she works as a business consultant. She helps companies create and launch new products as well as develop marketing and advertising strategies to support those products.

Scott Kirkpatrick

Scott Kirkpatrick is the Executive Vice President of Co-Productions & Distribution for Nicely Entertainment—a Los Angeles-based production and distribution company that produces original TV movies and scripted TV series—where he brokers major content deals and has executive produced a variety of TV movies including A Christmas Frequency, The Recipe Files and Sappy Holiday.

He is the author of the books: (i) Writing for the Green Light: How to Make Your Script the One Hollywood Notices, (ii) Introduction to Media Distribution: Film, Television and New Media (now in its second edition) and (iii) Mastering the Pitch: How to Effectively Pitch Your Ideas to Hollywood.

Janet W. Butler

Janet W. Butler splits her days between writing, editorial consulting—and music. Winner of the RWA Golden Heart Award, she is the creator of 12 Weeks to Your First (or Next) Novel, a compilation of lessons and tips from her popular workshop series. When she’s not singing or at the piano, she’s writing more books...proudly represented by RWA member Terrie Wolf at AKA Literary Management.

Leslie J. Wyatt

Leslie J. Wyatt knows deep in her bones where the mystery lives that the experience of romance gets better as you grow older, just like almost everything else (except eyebrows, of course). She’s been a professional writer since 1997, and in addition to her romance novels with Sibylline Digital First, has published three historical novels for middle graders, edited and contributed to a nonfiction book about hobby farms, and her portfolio includes more than 1000 articles, stories, and essays in various magazines, websites, anthologies and more. A presenter at literature festivals, writing conferences, writing workshops, podcasts and other writing related events, you can find her at lesliejwyatt.com, @lesliejwyatt and @artfortherestof us or hand-in-hand with her hubby by their campfire admiring just how many stars she has yet to discover in the night sky.

Ann Kellett

Ann has 30+ years of full-time, award-winning writing and editing experience, and is hard at work on her first romantic suspense novel.

Mike L. Downey

Mike L. Downey was a Texas high school valedictorian. Okay, his class had 11 students – maybe should’ve skipped that. He’s been a newspaper reporter, freelance writer, and taught high school and community college. Downey also spent years as a university instructor helping international students write. He’s worked as a ditch digger, construction worker, wrecking ball assistant, and bobtail truck driver. Now he spends his days trying in vain to sell his sci-fi/fantasy stories, but he’s happy with writing and with his wife and dog – maybe not in that order.

Flo Fitzpatrick

I’m multi-published in romance and mystery writing novels that usually toss in some paranormal activity and/or humor. My second book (with Kensington) "Hot Stuff", was nominated as Best Romantic Suspense by RT Book Reviews and optioned for film. I have a Masters in Theatre and a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance and nearly always set my novels in venues relating to performing arts. I’ve taught the in-person and online workshops "Dialogue- It’s Not Just Talk", "Show vs. Tell", published articles on how to hook readers and self-editing and presented a workshop about public speaking. After too many moves in the last 15 years, I settled in Alabama, share my life with an 11 year old mutt named Juniper, and before Covid, sang with a jazz band called The Usual Suspects.

Message from the President

BY JACKI RENÉE



I truly enjoyed meeting new people and reconnecting with writer friends at the 2024 Annual Conference in Austin, TX. Introducing Brenda Jackson—a trailblazer and an inspiration to countless writers—at the Welcome Reception was one of my personal conference highlights. Another standout moment was celebrating our first recipients of the Volunteer Service Award and honoring two RWA presidents, who have dedicated so much of their time, energy, and expertise to our organization, with lifetime memberships. It was surreal to be photographed with four legendary RWA presidents.

My greatest joy came from helping two First-Timers refine their pitches and later learning that they received requests from agents and editors. RWA2024 will forever hold a special place in my heart because I got to experience it from a different perspective.

A huge thank-you to all members who voted on the location of our 2025 Annual Conference. I hope that empowering members to choose the conference location becomes a tradition, allowing us to explore new places and expand our experiences. I look forward to seeing everyone at

our 2025 Annual Conference in Niagara Falls! Our organization is more than a professional network; we are a strong community of romance writers united by our commitment to creating a support system where everyone can build connections, share knowledge, and advance our careers. RWA's strength isn't measured by the number of members we have but by the ways we support our organization. When you volunteer, attend events, vote, or share your journey, you help us build the future of Romance Writers of America. Whether you're an aspiring author, an established author, or a supporter of RWA, you're part of something truly special.

Jacki Renée
2024/2025 RWA President

News & Updates

BITE-SIZED INFO ON THE INDUSTRY

PUBLISHING

Penguin Random House Grew Slightly More Diverse in 2024

Publishers Weekly

Penguin Random House continues to make slow but steady progress in diversifying its workforce. According to the publisher's fifth annual demographics report, 68.9% of the company's entire workforce of non-warehouse and warehouse employees were white in 2024, down from 70.1% in 2023. White people comprised 66% of PRH warehouse employees.

Based on the 2020 U.S. Census, 60% of the American population is white. While PRH's workforce is less diverse than the U.S. population, it is more diverse than the overall publishing workforce. According to the latest Lee & Low Diversity Baseline survey, white employees comprised 72.5% of the book business in 2023, while PW's forthcoming salary and jobs survey will indicate that white people made up roughly 80% of the publishing workforce last year, down from 83% in 2022. (PW's model is limited strictly to book publishers, whereas Lee & Low's model includes other book businesses, including literary agencies.)

[Read More.](#)

Book Publishing Sales Stayed Hot in August

Publishers Weekly

The publishing industry's hot summer sales streak continued in August. Sales at the 1,277 companies that report results to the Association of American Publishers' StatShot program came in at \$1.7 billion, notching an 8.5% increase in revenue compared to August 2023.

Year-to-date revenues were up 7.8%, to \$9.3 billion, for the first eight months of the year. The August increase follows an 18.1% jump in July 2024 over the previous year.

[Read More.](#)

Literary Publishers Embrace the Midnight Release Party

Publishers Weekly

The midnight book release party, which sees patrons descending on bookstores at 12 midnight to get their copy of a buzzy new book, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Still, it has evolved considerably in its short lifespan. The rise of the midnight release in the book business can be traced back to J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, which debuted in the U.S. in 1998. But it was the strict embargo put on the fourth book in the series, before its publication in 2000, that helped popularize the late-night bookstore gatherings.

[Read More.](#)

Pearson's sales growth accelerates to 5% as it increases 'AI capabilities'

The Bookseller

Pearson's sales growth accelerated to 5% for the third quarter and nine months ended 30th September 2024, from the equivalent period in 2023.

In Assessment & Qualifications, sales growth accelerated in Q3 to 6%, while the business unit was up 3% for the nine-month period.

The publisher is also growing its "AI capabilities" and has started to "see the commercial benefit".

- [Read more.](#)



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Member Benefit

Publisher Alley is a web-based sales reporting tool that includes all of the sales and inventory data from Baker & Taylor. Baker & Taylor is the world's largest book distributor! We work with publishers to provide their book products to all markets. Publisher Alley allows authors to see what titles libraries are buying on a daily basis. Publisher Alley is the BEST tool available for analyzing sales on your titles and competitive titles by subject area, sales level, publication date, price point, reviews, author affiliations, interdisciplinary identifiers and sales channel. Full bibliographic data, including cover images and table of contents is available for all titles.

Book sales data serves several needs:

- Easily produce market research for book proposals, based on sales of comparable titles. Approach the right publishers for each project.
- Evaluate the potential of projects for self-publication: learn what sells in which markets, and at what price points.
- Locate expert authors as sources for newspaper or magazine stories, or identify trends related to world events.

Why Plotting Is Good For Business

BY DIANA GEORGELOS

When companies launch new products, they spend a considerable amount of time on research and development. I would know. I've spent a significant part of my career working to create consumer packaged goods products, otherwise known as the products you find lining the shelves of grocery stores and pharmacies. The first step in any new product development process is to conduct a brainstorming meeting to generate innovative ideas. Then the team assesses the desirability and viability of the options and picks the best idea to develop. As part of the process, the team develops early-stage prototypes which they test and improve before launching the final version of the product into the marketplace.

Many different types of businesses use this approach when creating new products. Architects will develop blueprints and models before building a house. Artists will develop sketches and studies of their subject before painting a canvas. Tech developers will develop beta versions before building a full app. Fashion designers will sew samples before manufacturing a full run. Chefs will test recipes before assembling a menu of items. Writers, who plot, will create an outline before writing a book. A story outline can take many different forms. These can include writing a one pager with a beginning, middle and end, writing a synopsis, creating an outline using a spreadsheet, creating an outline using index cards, and the list goes on and on.

Why do architects, artists, tech developers, fashion designers, chefs and writers find it helpful

to create an early representation of their work? Creating a blueprint, model, prototype, sample or in the case of the writer, an outline before moving into the product production phase (or writing stage) has many benefits.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OR CREATING A PLOT OUTLINE OR A BOOK BLUEPRINT?

1. CREATES A TANGIBLE REPRESENTATION OF WHAT THE BOOK WILL BECOME

The minute you create a plot outline, you transform your ideas into something tangible. Thoughts swirling around in your imagination become words on a page. All the information about the plot, characters, setting, world, character arc, pov, etc., that your brain was keeping track of now has some place to live in the third dimension. When you write these elements down, you can see them and interact with them. An outline is an abbreviated version of a book. If you were to read your outline from beginning to finish, you would have a very good idea of what the finished product/book would eventually look like.

2. CREATES A PLAN TO FOLLOW WHEN WRITING THE BOOK

Creating an outline is useful because it creates a goal for your brains to work towards. You know exactly what you are supposed to create when you sit down to write. You won't be staring at an empty screen searching for inspiration. You'll have a plan. This allows you to potentially write much faster because you've already completed the planning step and are now working on the executing step.

3. CAN VALIDATE THE STORY CONCEPT WORKS WITH A MINIMUM INVESTMENT OF TIME, EFFORT, ENERGY.

So many authors, including me, have completed an entire draft of a book before figuring out that the structure didn't work the way they expected it to. They then had to replot the book and revise the entire book. If you write a detailed outline, you can see if the plot hangs together before you invest significant time, effort, and energy into writing the first draft.

4. CAN MORE EASILY EXPERIMENT WITH CHANGING THE STORY STRUCTURE IN EARLY STAGES

Plot outlines are easier to manipulate than full manuscripts. The key here is to start with saving a new version of your outline before you experiment with changing it. Once you have, you can try out possible ways of improving the underlying story structure. You can move scenes around by shuffling the order of index cards, or cutting and pasting cells in spreadsheets or cutting and pasting word blocks in Word or Scrivener. You can delete scenes with the push of a button. You can easily add or delete characters from the story. It is far easier to make changes to an outline than to a partial or full draft of a manuscript. After you have written a draft of a book, it is much more time consuming to make changes to the structure. The change you make in one chapter then likely will result in needed to make edits in the other chapters that follow. By trying out different approaches in a plot outline, it saves a lot of time and effort when compared to making these changes to a full manuscript.

5. IDENTIFIES FLAWS WITH THE CURRENT STORY DESIGN

When you develop a plot outline, it is easier to



see where that story is not working. Your brain can read and analyze an outline more quickly than it can an entire book. Plot holes that need to be fixed will be easy to spot. Characters you introduced early on that have disappeared from the plot can be added back in to later chapters. Analyzing what is working and what is not working is much easier to do when you are reading a five, ten or even a thirty paged outline when compared to trying to analyze the contents of an entire book.

6. ALLOWS YOU TO GET READER FEEDBACK EARLY

Many authors wait to elicit feedback until they have a draft of a book to give to alpha/beta readers or an editor to read. I know I did this for the first book I wrote. I've since changed my process. I now ask folks to provide feedback based on reading my outline of the book. Before I did this, I would have more extensive revisions. I found myself deleting chapters, rewriting chapters, and combining chapters based on the feedback I received. I had written so many words that I ended up having to delete or change. It wasn't very efficient. If you want to give alpha/beta readers something shorter to read, you can give them a two-page synopsis and then ask for their feedback based on that. This way you can

do a developmental edit on your book before you write the rough draft. This will decrease the number of rounds of edits you'll need to do in the future. Of course, the comments readers are providing at this stage are what you would use for developmental edits. Line and copy edits will still need to be addressed at a later stage after you've finished a full draft.

7. SERVES AS A FABULOUS REVISION TOOL AFTER YOU HAVE PRODUCED A DRAFT

An outline can serve both as a tool for self-editing, for organizing alpha/beta reader feedback and for organizing comments from a professional editor. As a self-editing tool, you can deconstruct the full draft you've written. You can write a sentence to describe each scene you've written and put it back into outline form. Then you can see if you are happy with the structure of the story you wrote.

An outline can also be used for organizing alpha/beta reader feedback and/or editor feedback. You can take all the comments you intend to address for each chapter/scene and list them under that section of your outline. That way, when you go to make those changes in the manuscript, you will have a roadmap to follow. You'll have compiled all the changes you need to make on a scene-by-scene basis in one place. This can make the revision process go more quickly.

8. CAN BE USED TO CREATE TOOL FOR SELLING YOUR BOOK AFTER YOU'VE FINISHED WRITING IT

Outlines can be helpful in developing sales tools for your book. When querying, most agents require writers to submit a synopsis, which can be created using an outline. Also, many publishers require writers to submit a synopsis before buying their book. When marketing to readers, writers need to provide summaries of their stories in the form of

blurbs and back cover copy to entice their target audience to buy their books. You can pull out pieces of your outline to create these sales materials.

So, to recap, when developing the new product, you'll be launching, your book, it is helpful to create and test a prototype before creating the final product. By creating a plot outline, you'll be able to optimize the quality of your books, which will increase reader satisfaction and engender greater loyalty. You'll also save time, effort, and energy during the writing process, so you'll be able to get your books to market more quickly. For these reasons, plotting makes good business sense.



Write Your Christmas-Romance TV-Movie Script Today!

BY SCOTT KIRKPATRICK

Ever thought about writing your own Christmas romance TV movie script?

You should! Christmas romance movies are cute, quaint and cozy. They're also major business verticals for television broadcasters and video on demand platforms—which means there's a huge audience out there.

Nearly 150 original Christmas romances are produced every year. Audiences seek them out as early as October. And although no writing project could ever be classified as 'easy', I will say that film/TV executives are slightly open-minded to receiving Christmas romance scripts from unknown and/or non-represented writers than other genres. (Why? Simply because they need a lot of them.)

Often referred to as 'Hallmark Christmas movies' (due to the Hallmark Channel producing the lion's share), one can just as easily find Christmas-themed romance movies across every major television channel including Lifetime, UPtv, Great American Media, CBS or ION as well as major VOD services like Peacock, Hulu and even Netflix. Not US-based? You'll equally find them on networks throughout Europe, Australia, South America and even in the Middle East. They range from big budgets with major talent down to small scale indie films. They're family friendly, advertiser friendly and they're surprisingly affordable to produce at scale.

How do I know so much about Christmas romance films? I produce them. Although I'm not a writer or storyteller, I am a TV/film executive who brokers Hollywood business deals that get romance titles—including Christmas romance films—financed, shot and broadcast. And with over 20 Christmas romance executive producer credits to my name, I can tell you what Hollywood executives need to see in Christmas romance scripts, how they like them presented and what factors you need to avoid.

Comfort Food

You need to first understand what the Christmas romance film is; it's visual comfort food for the Holidays.



Although many dedicated fans make it their annual mission to sit and watch every Christmas romance title that gets released, most audiences simply have them playing in the background (almost as part of the ambience or as a decoration on their TV screen).

Just like your favorite comfort food, a Christmas romance film is all about delivering a 'feeling' to your audience. One-part reliable romance, another part guaranteed happy ending all while built around a feel-good story that never guides you off course with 'reality' (politics, heartbreak or culture shock). Yes, there is a bit of a formula per se, but by no means should you take this audience for granted; coloring within the lines doesn't mean a sloppy job will cut it. This audience takes the genre very seriously and truly wants fresh stories (they just need them delivered in the comfort food packaging).

And just as comfort food is packaged in wrapping that screams out how good it will make you feel, so too is the Christmas romance film (the artwork sells a picturesque, dreamy Christmas and the story inside must deliver on that emotional promise).

Three Story Formats for You Christmas Romance Movie

Okay, there's more than three models you can follow, but let's first focus on the major market drivers first (because these three story structures represent 90% of the Christmas movies that get produced year on year). Here goes:

1. The Returning to Her Roots Film (Small Town Christmas) – Leading female has left her hometown to make a name for herself in the

big city. And just as her professional life is taking off, 'something' back home forces her to return (coincidentally during December no less). She doesn't want to go, but has to take care of this 'something'. And once she arrives, she inevitably meets that guy that got away. Maybe they were just on different paths in the past—or maybe he finally got out of his shell—but whatever the reason, a male figure from the past is suddenly very interesting. But of course, she has a life and career in the big city that she simply cannot give up, right? But as the Christmas holiday draws near, she realizes everything she needs was in her sweet hometown all along. And maybe that big city life wasn't all it seemed. Classic plot examples involve a deceased relative bequeathing a family property to our young protagonist (and that's the reason for her return); other unique approaches have had our protagonist's big city boss sending her back to her hometown on an assignment (and that work/life balance evolves into a major conflict when she sees how her big city attitude actually impacts everyday people).

2. The Secret Royal Romance – The name says it all, but let's dive in anyway. Our female protagonist has been on a bad luck streak for a while. Whether it be with boyfriends, work, friendships (or all of the above crisscrossing all at ones); she's hit a bad spot in life. And just like that, she serendipitously meets someone new and the chemistry is undeniable; he's a guy who suddenly seems different than the rest. But little does she realize, he is very different than the rest; he's a prince! Oh, but he doesn't want anyone to know that fact; you see, he's traveling incognito (a demanding Queen mother at home enforcing his royal responsibilities has just gotten to be too much). He wants to just

be a normal guy for a while and in doing so is free to be himself—which results in finding a perfect match (our female protagonist). The conflict arises when our lead protagonist finds out she's been lied to (of course, he's a prince and she'll get over it). In the end, he finds the courage to stand up to Queen mother and be romantically involved with the woman he desires (ready to upend the royal palace in the process). Side note, the country he presides over is completely fictional but still sounds quite charming. Second side note, yes our female protagonist could be the secret royal, but these films do play much better when it's a commoner female and a secret royal male.

3. A Christmas Themed Engagement or Wedding – Why not blend two audience drivers into one? Not that anyone would actually get married on Christmas Eve, but in the world of movies it makes for a fantastic plot device (and a beautiful poster with a fun 'gotta watch it' title). Whether the scenario is that our leading female protagonist suddenly finds herself obligated to go through with a marriage before Christmas day (generally for out of the box reasons (e.g., to break a 'love' curse or to be eligible for a lottery win, etc.)), she must go through the entire wedding scenario just in time for a Christmas miracle. Also, it could be her best friend getting married (or even her mother renewing her vows with her father). Whole point is to intertwine an A-plot classic Christmas Romance with a B-Plot wedding film. This allows for a build up so that we have a visual excuse to experience wedding bells and Christmas trees all within the same climactic scene. I distributed one about a hard-working city girl forced into planning her boss's

wedding before Christmas, that catch was that she had to plan the wedding with the Groom's nephew (who on one hand was our protagonist's polar opposite, yet on the other hand was a chemistry-driving perfect match). So while wedding bells rang for her boss, our leading girl shared a Christmas Eve kiss of her own.

Some executives will try to pretend the above story mechanisms are antiquated and that 'their audience' no longer seeks out such cliched plots. But the numbers don't lie. If you want to play around with these models slightly, go for it (perhaps she's a small-town girl who's forced to go to the big city?). But do respect the core story convention that is taking place within each of the above and keep that theme central to your protagonist's story. It's always fun to have a fresh take, but do keep in mind that audiences have a certain expectation of what they want to see in their Christmas movies; respect that and deliver what they want to see.

Remember, it's supposed to be well-executed comfort food.

Seven Tips on Writing a Christmas Romance Movie

The audience loves the world in which these films take place within, so you do need to keep the genre conventions in check. And as a result, executive are seeking specific things. Here are some ways to increase your odds on getting your script optioned, sold and produced:

1. Christmas in Every Shot – To sell a Christmas movie, I need Christmas imagery in every single shot of the film (so that at any given point, an audience member can clearly see

that this is a Christmas romance film). While that might seem more like a 'production' note, you need to write from this perspective as well. Make specific descriptions in your script about decorations, Christmas music and ugly Christmas sweaters. Work Christmas iconography or wardrobe into the plot of your film (e.g., characters trying to go incognito by dressing up in reindeer onesies, etc.). Although many people head to tropical locations for Christmas (and many people who celebrate Christmas live in warm climates), the 'charm' of a Christmas movie involves a chilly and charming environment. Think picturesque landscapes (mountains, small towns), cute winter clothing (coats, hats, scarves), hot cocoa by a fire and lots of Christmas decorations.

2. Keep the Protagonist Female – The vast majority of the audience for these films is women. And after having personally analyzed the ratings and metrics across hundreds of Christmas movies (for a variety of business presentations), there is no question about it: female protagonists drive these stories. There have been a handful of male-led Xmas films—I'm not in denial about that fact—but most focus on a female lead falling in love (because those are the ones that perform best).
3. Keep the Budget Low – These films are generally TV movies, which means they're produced on minimal budgets (under USD \$1 million). They don't have the luxury of long productions, bottomless bank accounts and incredible visual effects; they're quite limited in terms of scope and need to deliver way more from a lot less. As a writer, you can do an incredible job helping the team achieve this goal (which WILL help your career once you're seen as a writer who understands writing for a budget). You can achieve this by:

(i) using recurring locations (the ranch that's been bequeathed, etc.), (ii) controlled dialogue scenes (talent sitting at tables or on benches to speak, NOT driving around in cars, and (iii) limiting the total number of characters in the script (limit it to 6-8 major speaking parts, with a max of 2-4 'day players'; this isn't a novel, every character costs money and each line of dialogue increases an already limited budget.

4. Remember, it's Cold in Winter! – Might seem like common sense, but you'd be shocked by how many scripts we review where critical scenes take place in situations that make zero sense given the harshness of the winter months. Totally fine to have critical scenes take place outdoors, but make mention of things our leads are doing to keep warm—e.g., sipping hot cocoa, cuddling up next to a fire pit, helping the love interest with their scarf. Although most of these films are shot in the heat of the summer, these are the key details that help you as a writer sell your project to buying producers.



5. Page numbers are important – Scripts are first analyzed by their number of total pages. Why? Because one script page ends up being about one minute of completed screen time. And since contracts with networks have specific running time requirements—they need to fit broadcast slots—the number of pages will allow an executive to sense whether your script has enough ‘meat on the bone’. Aim to have 94-to-96 pages. That’s plenty to get an 86-minute movie (while allowing trims to be made in the editing room). Never go over 100 pages; something about triple digits just stops some execs from even reading page one.
6. Avoid heavy subjects – Christmas romance TV movies aren’t the genre for heavy dramatic subjects. These movies are delivering on a fantasy of the holiday season (a 90-minute story where the world is perfect). No deaths—unless it’s a distant relative who’s bequeathed that ranch back home as mentioned above. No disease or illness. No abuse, trauma or violence. These topics can be explored in other genres (that can still take place during Christmas). There are Christmas horror films and even Christmas action films; so the holiday can be versatile. But in the realm of a Christmas romance TV movie, the kind that plays on Hallmark, Lifetime and the others, people are seeking comfort food and uplifting stories; deliver on that for this particular genre.
7. Be creative with your Characters – You’re biggest job is fleshing out fresh/fun characters. By creating truly fleshed out characters (with deep, personal motivations), you can make ‘traditional’ [cliched?] stories feels quite fresh. Most scripts fall flat because the stories are expected and the characters

feel flat (going through the motions within an expected storyline). However, creating fresh characters with deeply rooted motivations and conflicting personalities can take even the most ‘expected’ storyline suddenly fun. We want to see how these characters cross that inevitable finish line.

Bonus Tips:

First bonus tip, you will need professional screenwriting software. Final Draft is probably the most widely used. The reason is that line producers (the ones who actually dismantle scripts page by page and line by line to schedule and budget projects) require the .fdx file that such software can spit out.

And second bonus tip, you don’t need to worry about the Hallmark ‘nine-act structure’. A few screenwriting gurus have mentioned that Christmas scripts should be divided into nine separate acts—and each act listed on the screenplay’s pages—but this isn’t necessary. The nine acts represent television commercial breaks (and it can provide you with a good sense of overall structure), but there’s no reason to follow it religiously.

Afterthoughts

This is a very approachable genre. It’s one Hollywood needs every single year and is a great place to get your toes wet in the professional screenwriting world. I still suggest needing more than one single script to get things moving (e.g., two scripts plus five to ten loglines for cute/clever ideas). But, this is a very welcoming genre and a great place to kickstart your screenwriting career.

“Let’s Start at the Very Beginning..”

BY JANET W BUTLER

Okay. At the risk of inflicting a massive earworm on you (!) or having you burst into song, let me issue an immediate disclaimer: this article isn’t going to be about “Do-Re-Mi.”

Or is it?

Consider this a love letter, if you will...to beginning again.

I’m not talking about rebooting a written work, or even an entire career. I’m not talking about taking stock of where you are in the process and deciding when, if, or how you want to proceed—or not. I’m talking about something way, way more basic.

Let’s face it: if you’ve been to a couple dozen writers’ conferences—as I have—and/or you’ve been a seasoned veteran in the trenches for a while—as I also have!—you can come to a point where you start to wonder if anyone really has anything new to say. You’ve studied bird-by-bird and GMC and the Hero’s Journey and the three-act structure. You’ve made character outlines, written synopses of various lengths (probably muttering to yourself the whole time!), and batted things around with a critique partner (or seven). After several years (or decades) of doing this, no matter your success (i.e., sales) level, you can start to feel...a little stale.

Ever been there, brothers and sisters? Probably. A little hesitant to admit it? Also probably.

Your common sense tells you there’s still plenty more to learn; your gut is all too good at reminding you of your weaknesses, your pet words and phrases, your tendencies to overwrite or underwrite, and so on and so forth. But this can also be a two-edged sword, in that the better you know your own work, and/or even the works of others, the more “blind” you can tend to become to what made this all so much fun in the first place. You can feel hemmed in, caged, or even stifled...and you start to wonder if you’re merely burned out or in fact, really have no talent.



The latter, of course, is a whole other issue, one it would take more than this article to unpack. But the first is a very real possibility. It can make you wonder if it’s worth your time to go hear one more speaker, one more rah-rah chorus, or one more technical or marketing consultant who promises the moon (for a price).

Let me reassure you...it is. But not as the person you are now.

It’s worth it, several times over, *as the writer you used to be.*

How to go back there? Start at the very beginning. Again.

You may think this sounds crazy. “I know all the basics!” you protest. “That’s the problem! No one has anything fresh to say or add anymore!” But—if you can—try to set that persona aside for a moment, or an entire weekend, and you might truly surprise yourself.

I know. Because I’ve done it, and it’s amazing.

This happened to me by serendipity. I was doing the usual pre-conference prep, looking over the schedule of workshops for an upcoming trip, and zeroing in on the ones aimed at the Advanced Writer—because I *was* one. I’d won writing awards; I’d placed very well in contests; I had even managed to sell a book to a small press. So if anyone qualified as Advanced, by golly, it was me. I’d worked hard for that status, and I deserved to be in those workshops at a slightly higher altitude than the scrabbling “newbies” below me.

The only problem was all the workshops sounded like more of the same-ol’ same ol’. Or they were taught by people with whom I was already familiar, and people whose style I *didn’t* want to emulate. And suddenly, I started to wonder if maybe I should just skip the conference altogether...

...until I looked at the Beginner track workshops. And an idea hit me.

What if I went into this conference as if it was my very first one again? What if I didn’t hang out with the big kids, but went back into the world of bright-shiny-new instead? What would happen?

So, I did an experiment. An adventure.

I didn’t pretend to be a newbie, except in my own head. And in the workshops I chose to attend.

But it *was wonderful*.

Part of that was due to sheer relaxation. In the Beginner tracks, I had nothing to prove. I had no authors who’d look askance at me for being with a small press; I could think outside my own boxes for a weekend. I could sit in the back of the class, or in the middle rows, or even in the front (remember when we all sat in the front and took notes as fast as we could?), and absorb the information being offered as if I’d never heard it before.

And the absolute gobsmacking miracle? Some of it *was* new. Some of it *was* different. And all of it gave me a new perspective. A breath of fresh air. And some just plain fun. In an industry that can sometimes forget it’s supposed to be fun...? This alone is worth the price of admission.

But you still may be saying to yourself, “That’s wasting time. I already know the basics. I need advanced guidance. I need marketing help. I



need to know how to write a newsletter. I need to know how to put together an author mailing list. I need...I need...I need..."

Yes, you may need all those things. At one time or another, all of us need them.

But not necessarily when we're already feeling burned out.

Or stifled.

Or hemmed in.

Or resentful because our critique partner just sold her twenty-fourth book and we're lucky we've got five.

If you go into the advanced "classes" with that mindset, you're going in a shade desperate...and that's not attractive. In any sense. Nor, as it turns out, does it help your creativity.

(Like, who could have ever seen *that* coming? LOL!)

But turning things back a notch? Letting yourself, for a weekend, be a beginner again? Letting yourself listen once more to nuts-and-bolts fundamentals without second-guessing them in your mind?

That can, and will, help your creativity. I know, because it helped mine. It also helped me regain a sense of humor about this (at times) less-than-rational business.

But maybe best of all? It helped me realize *how far I'd already come*.

This isn't something you can get by slotting yourself into the Advanced track and never

leaving. Because in that track, there's always going to be someone who's way further along than you are. Or who got way luckier breaks than you did. Or who "happened" to submit just what the publishers were all deciding they wanted, ahead of the curve, and made out like a bandit. Or—it deserves saying again—will look down on you for your publishing choices, no matter which ones you make.

In the Beginner tracks, by and large, your classmates haven't done any of those things. They're looking to figure this game out. And if they do realize that someone with some "chops" is sitting in on a Basic session? Odds are they'll be thrilled to make your acquaintance.

But you know what this also does?

It states, very quietly but firmly, that wherever we all are in the process, in some areas every single one of us is still a "beginner." That even people who've plied the trade for awhile might enjoy and benefit from a "refresher course." That, even in the midst of accolades or achievements or impressive sales figures...if we're vigilant, we can still stay humble and joyful.

And *that* has long-term benefits not just for our writing, but for everything in our lives.

So if you're feeling a little ragged, a little charred around the edges? Maybe the cure is closer, and simpler, than you suspect. Maybe it's just a matter of pulling out the jump rope and sidewalk chalk...and playing a little harmless "pretend."

Try it. Breathe in some Beginner air again.

It might turn out to be the most invigorating thing your writing's ever experienced.

Finding Your Why, What, and When For NaNoWriMo

BY LESLIE J. WYATT

Still deciding whether to participate in [NaNoWriMo 2024](#)? Then you already know what it is, why it exists, and the basics. What might be less clear is how to successfully complete 50,000 words in 30 days. If that sounds daunting, take courage. With a bit of planning and preparation, you'll have everything you need to stay the course.

FIND YOUR WHY

First off, find your why. This vital slice of information is your fuel for the road, and when you're somewhere in the backstretch of November, holding at 30,000 words with ten days or less to fill your quota, that is not the time to run out of gas. Your why is powerful, and several whys even more so. That being the case, grab a moment and cup of coffee or tea, and sit down to define your top three (or more) reasons you want to complete NaNoWriMo this year. A pertinent question to ask yourself to locate your why is "If I'm enough as a writer right now, why would I do this?" That can lead you to a why that resonates with you and has enough authenticity behind it for the long haul.

Your whys furnish staying power for your journey. Some motivators might be that you've had a book idea forever, dabbled around the edges, maybe even thrown down a few paragraphs, and really just want to write the dang thing. Could be you want to write while not simultaneously over-editing every word (one of

NaNoWriMo's founding directives is overcoming perfectionism). By setting a relatively modest word count goal and emphasizing quantity over quality, the challenge encourages writers to push past their internal critics and perfectionist tendencies. Maybe you want to take a stab at establishing a more solid writing habit (also one of NaNoWriMo's key principles), and 30 days of showing up can help establish a new norm. Not that you'll necessarily continue to write 1600+ words a day on average year round, but the fact remains—if you show up every day and put words down, you cannot walk away unchanged. Habits are powerful.

If you struggle with the isolation aspect of writing, another reason to involve in NaNoWriMo could be their robust online writing community which also features local chapters that may organize in-person events to launch, encourage, and celebrate. Since their inception in 1999, this aspect of the non-profit organization has evolved in wonderful ways. Participants can find all sorts of features on the NaNoWriMo site—from word trackers to badges as you pass certain word counts or other milestones, writing dares, pep talks, swag and more. You belong!

Once you lock down the reasons why you want to participate, write them on a sticky note (or several sticky notes) and post where you can see them at a glance so when you're bouncing

around off-road on the backside of the desert mid-November and courage falters, you remember your why, step on the accelerator and finish strong.

FIND YOUR WHAT

Now that you've defined your why, you definitely need to lock down your what, as in what are you planning to write? If you happen to be on NaNoWriMo's email list (sign up if not!), you'll be seeing their emails regarding NaNo Prep, their wonderful 6 week program to take you from developing a story idea, through creating your characters, constructing a detailed plot or outline, world building, connecting with a writing community and how to find and manage your time.

Whether you go it solo in preparation for NaNoWriMo or opt in for [NaNo Prep](#), a great NaNoWriMo resource to set you up for the November challenge, planning your what is the equivalent of loading your vehicle with all the supplies and snacks you'll need for your trip. While this is not an exhaustive or mandatory list, the following elements can sustain you on your one month journey to 50,000 words.



- Define the genre. Romance, of course, but will your new manuscript be contemporary, historical, adventure or ? Not sure or feel in a rut? Now could be the time to explore something new.
- Research—contemporary novels may not require as much of this essential, but if you're going with a historical romance this time or other more research-driven creations, doing a certain amount of research will set you up for your journey. And face it—fitting in time to research while also writing 1666 words on average per day can be the equivalent of a slow leak in your tire—maybe not enough to sideline you, but why make it any harder on yourself?
 - No worries if you don't have the full body of research under your belt when November 1st rolls around. Once you launch, if you hit a spot where you're unsure if what you're writing is historically accurate, simply insert the time-honored notation, TK, so that when you begin your revision, it will signal you to verify your facts (TK stands for "to come" or "to be known," a placeholder used by writers and editors to indicate that additional information or text will be added later).
- Plot, structure, setting and characters—yes. Those passengers in your vehicle are essential if you're going to reach the coveted 50k word count. Trying to plan those things while writing your 1666 words? It's much easier to go into the challenge with these aspects at least conceptualized beforehand.
- With all the above fresh in your brain, write a one page synopsis as a jumping off point. There are, of course, other aspects you could plan and prep for if you have the lead time.

That said, if you just learned about NaNoWriMo and don't have the leisure of weeks to plan, no worries. One beautiful thing about NaNoWriMo is that there are no NaNo police monitoring whether every single word you write is indeed on manuscript only. In fact, the underlying mission statement of the organization is to encourage and enable writers to reach for more. If the first 10k or more words of your November challenge consist of planning your characters, setting, plot, etc., it all counts.

FINDING YOUR WHEN

You've got your why and crafted your what. The final essential? Your when. We all know time can sideline us in a heartbeat if we don't take it into consideration. While we all have the set 24 hours in a day, it does not follow that we have free time trotting around waiting to be filled with writing. If only! Mentioning the obvious here, but if we attempt to add another element to our already crammed schedules, the wheels might just come off about halfway to November 30.

To set yourself up to roll across the finish line without ramping your stress level to the max, this final piece of planning is vital and not rocket science. More like basic math. How long does it take you to write roughly 1666 words—an hour? Two? That's the realistic time slot you'll need to carve out per day while still maintaining your basic life duties. First off, make room in your schedule. We do this for doctor and dentist appointments. Granted, those don't happen every day, but NaNoWriMo only happens once a year and for one month. If this is something you really want to do, this investment in you as a writer and a person, then it's worth prioritizing. Doing so necessitates reviewing your priority list. As a suggested place to start, consider the following order:

1. Partner + kids depending on your season
2. Work if you have a day job
3. Sleep, eat, and a modicum of exercise so your health doesn't tank
4. Write.
5. Let everything else that usually fills what little spare time you have take a lower seat until November is up. (Then while your newly established daily writing schedule is fresh, how about a down-sized daily schedule so you keep your momentum and a portion of the time slot you've established in which to write?).

One final piece to plan for: those days when your schedule goes off the rails. The kids come down with the mumps, work needs you overtime, or a raft of company descends. 1666 words are not happening today. Or for several days. Meanwhile, you fall further and further behind in your word count. Discouragement creeps in, and before you know it, you're drowning. But wait! One word can rescue you, and that word is *weekends*. Weekends can offer more writing time. For the month of November, factor in a longer session on Saturdays or Sundays (or whichever are your days off). Craft your own version of that—maybe a session in the morning and one in the afternoon? One big double session? Oh, and of course Thanksgiving falls in November. How helpful. Plan that in.



As a variation on the weekend theme, any time you're on a writing roll, pass your 1666 words, and still have time and passion to burn, build toward your total word count. Space bank, if you will, against that inevitable day when everything conspires to keep you from your keyboard.

Once you've hammered out your why, your what, and your when, wrap them up in a big bow by recruiting your partner and/or a bestie or two by giving them your NaNoWriMo manifesto. Not only will that encourage their buy-in, they can be cheerleaders for you on your journey, help

protect your writing times, and remind you of your why when you're typing in a fog. Remember to assure them (and yourself) that this rigor is for the month of November, not the rest of known existence.

Now, armed with your authentic why, a solid jumping-off spot for your what, and a realistic plan for your when, the only missing ingredient for a successful NaNoWriMo 2024 is to familiarize yourself with their website, joining up in advance so when November 1 arrives, you're ready, set, go for the journey.

Want to write for the Romance Writers Report?

Submit your pitch and earn up to \$500 if your article is selected and published.

[Click here to submit your pitch!](#)

The Romance Writers Report Committee seeks articles for all levels and tracks of writing. We welcome submissions from beginner to expert authors, and aim to include a diverse array of subject matter expertise, including craft, industry, marketing, business, and more. While articles of all themes are welcome, here are some areas that will be given specific focus in upcoming issues:

- *December 2024 - Writing Goals (submit by October 31, 2024)*
- *January 2025 - Book signings (submit by November 30, 2024)*
- *February 2025 - Love Scenes (submit by December 31, 2024)*
- *March 2025 - The 5 Senses (submit by January 31, 2025)*



Next Steps After NaNoWriMo (Even if You Don't Get To 50,000 Words)

BY ANN KELLETT

I'm not too proud to admit it: after three NaNoWriMo experiences, I have yet to reach the 50,000-word goal.

Along the way, though, I have learned to flip that statement into a positive: for three years in a row, I have successfully benefited from NaNoWriMo in many ways, but the word count is not one of them.

In fact, I believe the word count is not the only—or even the main—thing that counts in NaNoWriMo. Here are five take-aways to keep the momentum going for those of us who might not reach the (arbitrary) goal.

1. **Celebrate your progress.** NaNoWriMo gives us practice doing what so many famous writers recommend: developing a regular writing habit. Writing every day or on a consistent schedule is crucial to achieving major goals. Whether you wrote 500 words or 25,000, and whether you started with a brand new plot idea or beefed up your years-in-the-making work in progress, every word brings you closer to the satisfaction of typing “The End.” That is tangible progress, so be proud of the work you've done.

2. **Reflect on the experience.** Throughout the month and as soon as it's over, take some time to think about what went well for you and what challenges you faced. Identify the factors that

boosted your progress, whether working in a group or using a timer to define your writing time, and do more of those things. In addition, consider what held you back—for me, it's character arcs—and find ways to reframe those issues into bite-size tips that you can incorporate into your work. This isn't always easy, but it will help you strengthen your writing skills.

3. **Set new writing goals.** Use what you learned as you reflected on the experience to set tangible, measurable goals. These could be to write for 30 minutes every day, to read a book or watch a video about your weakest area, or to read more books by an author you especially admire in your subgenre. These goals could be daily, weekly, or monthly, and need to mesh well with your schedule and other responsibilities. The important thing is to keep making progress at a pace that suits you.

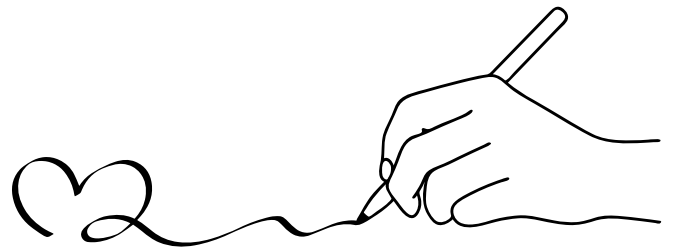


4. Reconnect with your story. The good news is that NaNoWriMo encourages you to take creative risks and pursue new ideas. The bad news is that after a month of intense focus, you might feel burned out. While you don't want to lose your momentum, it's a good idea to take a short break at NaNoWriMo's end. After a few days, you'll be able to re-read what you've written and review your outline or notes with a fresher perspective. You're likely to find that your passion for your story is reignited—the perfect motivation to keep going.

5. Join or continue with a critique group or other writing community. Engaging with other writers is an important—and fun—part of NaNoWriMo, and one that provides benefits throughout the year. There are plenty of options: in-person writing groups, online forums, or social media. The writers you encounter will provide support,

encouragement, and camaraderie as you discuss and provide feedback on each other's work. In addition, the accountability inherent in writing with others can be a powerful motivator and inspiration.

Will I keep putting the time and effort into NaNoWriMo this year and in the future? You bet! The experience is just one of many opportunities to learn and grow along our writing journeys. The important thing is to keep writing, regardless of the word count.



FIND YOUR RWA
CHAPTER

National Novel Writing Month: The Most Fun You'll Ever Have Writing . . . Really

BY MIKE L. DOWNEY

Stephen King wrote that writing long fiction is “. . . a difficult, lonely job; it's like crossing the Atlantic in a bathtub.” Mr. King obviously never did National Novel Writing Month (NANOWRIMO).

Now this is not a dig at Mr. King since I'm obviously no Stephen King, but then who is? This is about you writing a novel in a month and having the most fun writing you've ever had.

“Fun” and “writing” – not two words you see together very often, especially if you are serious about the craft. You've likely read a couple of books, watched a few videos, listened to some podcasts, maybe sharing with a writing group. The word you've likely heard most is “work” in association with writing. Now it's true writing can be, often is, work, but I'm talking about you writing a novel, maybe your first novel – and having an unbelievably-great time. NANOWRIMO is here for you.

First, a brief history: the National Novel Writing Month started in 1999, is now a non-profit, and brings together hundreds of thousands of people worldwide every November in a delirious shared adventure of novel writing. And it's free. The basic premise of NANOWRIMO is to write a 50,000 word novel in 30 days. Simple eh? That's only 1,667 words a day. Relax. Just breathe. You can do this.

What's the central deterrent to you writing nearly 2,000 words a day for a month? Time, of course. And you. Yes, you. That face in the mirror is the biggest curb on creativity. We think we have to get it down perfectly the first time. We have to correct our typos. We doubt. We second-guess every writing decision. We hear our English teachers, our parents, our spouses, our friends, our writing group even before we type a single word: “This would be better if you . . .”

NANOWRIMO is here to free you from any editor stomping all over your creativity. There is a time for editing. NANOWRIMO is not it. This is the time for you to lose all your inhibitions and just write for the fun of it, to create. There's nothing quite like that thrill.

Maybe you know what I'm talking about. You write something – a piece of fiction, a poem, an essay, even an email – and it really sings, and you think: “Wow. Where in the world did that come from?” It's one of the greatest feelings in the world. NANOWRIMO can be a whole month of that feeling, that creative wow.

And you have a novel at the end of that month. Imagine that. Then you can let loose that internal editor. He or she has something amazing to work with.

But back to the writing. So, you have three main things to do before you actually write that NANOWRIMO book in November. In a nutshell, they are story, time, and support.

First, you must have a story, and if you're a reader (or you wouldn't be reading this), you likely have a story you want to tell (or you wouldn't be reading this). And it has to be a story you really want to tell, not because you think it'll be popular and sell like Stephen King, but a story you are craving to write, a story you'd like to read.

The "writing" of that novel starts then: you have an idea that becomes characters that becomes scenes that becomes a plot (sometimes).



The founder of NANOWRIMO, Chris Baty, wrote a short fun book about his creation: "No Plot? No Problem!" that pretty much sums it up. Write the novel first; the plot will resolve itself. As many of you know, "writing" isn't just the words on the page part; it's ongoing in your head. Yes, "words on the page" is paramount for NANOWRIMO, but you as the writer can be – and should be – thinking about your novel all the time. That's how when you do sit down to type – you are literally writing as fast as you can type. Seriously.

Writing a novel in a month lends itself more to the "pantser" type of writer, one who makes up the story on the fly. This doesn't mean you "planners" should not do NANOWRIMO; just plan beforehand. When I decided to write a Western, I wanted to include technology not apparent in typical Westerns. So, I did research before November.

In any case, whether pantser or planner, just make sure you have a story you really want to tell before you start.

Second, time. How do you find the time? You have a job; you have a family; you have hobbies; you have to eat and sleep and do all those things that inform your writing. Welcome to the club – with the exception of the Kings and the Hoovers and the Pattersons and the Rowlings, most authors we read have a job in addition to doing all the other things you're doing. So, figure out where to carve out the time for that one month.

When I did my first NANOWRIMO novel, I was a single parent with two kids, working full-time and freelancing on the side. I looked at my schedule for November. I decided to get up 10 minutes early Monday-Friday to write. Then, I took a 10-minute break in the morning and afternoon like everyone else at work did – but I wrote – and I was writing through the noon hour after cramming down lunch.

After work was family time, but I always found a half-hour or more before bedtime to write to reach my word goal. Baty details this more in his book if you're interested. But I found two hours a day during the work week to write. And that didn't even count weekends when I could often write even longer. For me, I aimed to write 2000 words a day to pad for those days when life got too busy to write even 10 minutes.

Right now, I know some of you are thinking that there's no way you can write anything in 10 minutes. "It takes me that long to get comfortable at my keyboard with my coffee and my pillows and my . . . blah, blah, blah." Balderdash. If you have a story that you are dying to write, when you sit down to write (or stand up to type on your phone; I have friends who write on their phones), you can't wait to pour it out onto the screen. Having to stop will feed your next writing time. You'll find yourself anxious to write, and that's what will keep you writing and telling that story.

Now I'm a slow typist, about 45 words a minute, but even writing at half that pace for 120 minutes a day is over 2,000 words a day (you math folks can quibble over this). Since 2009, I have eight NANOWRIMO books to my name (yep, over 400,000 words). Did I hit the NANOWRIMO goal every year? Obviously not. There were years when life got too hectic for me to finish, but those stories are still there for me to revisit. I have words on the page instead of a blank page.

Let's face it – you can't edit a blank page to make it better. Write first. No matter how much – or how little -- you write, it has value since it's your story.

Third is support. Tell everyone you know that you are participating in National Novel Writing Month. They will ask you every day how your book is coming along. This is tremendous incentive and encouragement to keep you going. Writing can be a lonely craft as King noted, but it doesn't have to always be.

An aside (or a word of warning) when you tell everyone you are writing this novel in a month. There will be naysayers, sometimes other writers (shame on them), who will say a NANOWRIMO

novel of "only 50,000 words" isn't a "real novel." Hey, "The Notebook" is a shade over that as is "The Red Badge of Courage." And you've likely heard of "The Great Gatsby" and "Fight Club" or maybe "Fahrenheit 451" – all about 50,000 words. Are those not "real novels"? Write your novel first. You always can add more.

And those same naysayers may say you can't really write anything of substance in a month. Tell that to the more than 600 authors who published their NANOWRIMO novels (not even counting the self-published ones). "Water for Elephants" is probably the most prominent one since it was also made into a film.

Back to the support point: find your NANOWRIMO writing community. It's likely there is a municipal liaison in your area, a writer like you, who has volunteered to guide others through the NANOWRIMO experience. My first few years, the in-person write-ins at the local library were invaluable to keep me going. Showing up with your laptop to write with others in the same space is surprisingly supportive, having that shared experience.

During the pandemic, the virtual write-ins also were helpful. So, if you don't have something local, reach out through the NANOWRIMO website. And latch onto a couple of writing buddies for encouragement and to encourage.

That's it. Come November, get ready to write your first (or my ninth) NANOWRIMO novel. You won't regret it. Good luck, and keep on writing.



The Yeah, Buts, Yoda, and Marian the Librarian

BY FLO FITZPATRICK

The *Yeah, Buts*: Two little words we use every day, which, when found in the same sentence (whether sequentially or intermittently), can cause havoc in our lives and writing.

Easing into where to find *yeah but*s...quite often they sneak into excuses having to do with diet and exercise.

Ex. "Fat Freddie's cheeseburger with the fries and shake is about 10,000 calories and 200 grams of fat." "Yeah but Fat Freddie's is having a half-off sale on the Big Blob Burger meal!"

"I'm so out of shape. I should do...something."
"Yeah, but Mister Superjock on YouTube says cardio is useless and I don't have the money to hit the gym so I'm going to lie on the couch and binge watch *Midsomer Murders*."

Yeah, but...what does this have to do with writing? Plenty. Let's start with the yeah, but of envy. "Yeah, Ms. Super Success hits all those best seller lists because she has a spouse who supports her, but I can't perfect my writing because I have to work full time." "Yeah, Mr. Awesome is winning contests but I can't win anything because I never got a Master's Degree in Writing."

The lazy *yeah but*s. "Yeah, I should be writing, but it's hot outside and my creativity crashes when it's over seventy-five degrees." And the flipside: "Yeah, I should be writing but it's cold outside and

my creativity crashes when it's under seventy-five degrees."

Often, *Yeah, but*s can lead to procrastination or inactivity. A few weeks ago, I was engaged in an internal debate about entering a mystery novella contest. I have two versions of a work-in-progress (same hero/heroine). One is a retro mystery; the other a time travel romantic suspense. I read the rules and thought, "I could submit the retro mystery if I add twelve-thousand words." Then, without warning or invitation, the *Yeah, but*s came charging into my head. "Yeah, but I really should be focusing on finishing the romantic suspense that's now at forty-thousand words." "Yeah, but I'll never get this novella finished by the deadline...why start?" I ignored the "yeah" telling me "This requires writing the ending chapters. No matter what happens with the contest, you'll have an ending that could work for either the retro mystery or the time travel." I let the deadline pass. I didn't enter. I still don't have an ending. I sabotaged myself with a series of *Yeah, But*s.



Like many writers, I have a love/hate relationship with independent publishing. The love is knowing I can publish after I've gotten my rights back for a previous release. The hate gets into *yeah buts* for new works. "Yeah, but if I publish independently, I have to deal with all the promotion." Spoiler! The majority of authors deal with promotion, no matter who publishes the book. "Yeah, but won't agents and other houses reject me for going the independent route?" Some will. The truth is there are bestselling authors who've published independently with much success, paving the way for others to do so as well. Our decisions might be right; they might be wrong...constant *Yeah, butting* about the issue leads to nothing.



When *Yeah, buts* are negatives that are wrecking your writing, it's time to take control and banish them. Acknowledge that you're using those two words to avoid the real issue. Backtracking to the novella contest, the truth was I preferred my time travel romance and had no desire to write the retro mystery. I should have accepted that instead of continuing my *Yeah, but* excuses and accomplishing nothing.

Yeah but process comparisons: Don't *yeah put* yourself into scrapping a work because your

writing technique differs from the author you admire who claims outlining is the only way to write a novel. There are plenty of award winning authors who are pantsers and flee in terror when they hear the word outline. Some authors do a mix. Try each technique and see which works for you.

Yeah but self-doubt comparisons: "Yeah, I should write the novel, but I'll never be as good as (fill in the blank!) so I quit." These *yeah, buts* are possibly the hardest to banish because we ALL have self-doubts, but let's give it a shot.

To begin with, "good" is beyond subjective. I'm not naming names but I can think of several best-selling books I thought weren't fit to grace a crowded landfill. Those books had reviews splitting between "incredibly wonderful" and "where's a shredder when you need one?" Who's right? Who's wrong? No one. It's a matter of individual taste.

Next, are you equating apples with oranges? It might be true that you'll never write a legal thriller like a John Grisham or Scott Turow but maybe your forte is in inspirational romance? Focus on *your* strengths and enjoy reading John or Scott after a productive day working on motivation and conflict for your characters.

A huge reason to dump the self-doubt comparisons: If you stop writing you might have trashed the chance to have an impact on someone else's life. If you provide even one reader with a smile at the end of a rough day, that smile is worth sending the *Yeah, but* to that crowded landfill along with that novel you hated.

Which brings me to Yoda (I'm sure you were wondering how, when, and why he'd make an

appearance.) I love Yoda. He's cute and generally pretty wise. Except for the whole "Do or Do Not. There is no Try." In my opinion, this implies one either succeeds the first time out or is branded a failure for trying. I realize it's meant to be the opposite...to encourage someone to take action but "there is no try" is just... depressing. I have yet to be convinced "There is no Try" isn't a self-defeating, self-esteem-draining philosophy that causes someone to give up before they start.

Consider: Did Kurt Browning just strap on his skates one day, stroll onto the ice and complete a perfect quadruple jump? You can bet Kurt tried multiple times and fell on his bottom more than once. If J.K. Rowling had stopped trying to pitch Harry Potter, she'd still be getting financial assistance and Daniel Radcliffe probably wouldn't have had the chance to win a Tony Award.

Say you want to give NaNoWrMo a shot. Wham! Here come the *Yeah, buts* followed by the *Yoda No Try* blues. "Yeah, but my friend Kacia did this and she said the stress was so bad her hair fell out." (Maybe it was the beyond-expiration date of her color kit?) "Yeah, but I don't have time to do this, I have groceries to buy." (Uh...delivery?) "Yeah, but no one actually gets published writing a book in a month." Disclaimer: Thanks to an insane deadline, my second book, *Hot Stuff*, was written as a "Book- in- a-Week," and ended up being nominated as Best Romantic Suspense by RT Book Club and optioned for film.

The *Yeah, buts* have a way of channeling Yoda undermining you with, "If you don't DO, don't try." This is when misery hits and the only thing you "do" is dive into a bagful of chocolate because you're in need of a serious dopamine fix.

And finally, let me introduce the lovely Marian (the Librarian!) and a quote from "The Music Man."

Scene: Professor Harold Hill is urging Marian to meet him at the footbridge for a romantic interlude. She wants to give in but a life's worth of *Yeah, buts* are holding her back.

Marian: "No, please, not tonight. Maybe tomorrow.

Harold Hill: "Oh, my dear little librarian. You pile up enough tomorrows, and you'll find you've collected nothing but a lot of empty yesterdays. I don't know about you, but I'd like to make today worth remembering."

Yeah, buts became Marian's empty yesterdays. Are they yours?



A Writer's Voice, Part 1—Or, I Know It When I Hear It

BY JANET W BUTLER

Voice.

Surely no subject (except maybe the Holy Grail, or the elusive "will of God for my life") has been so misunderstood, had more mistaken info bandied about concerning it, or been a greater mystery to all and sundry than the subject of a writer's "voice."

I once had a person ask me, "When I'm writing about the heroine, then I'm writing in her voice. And in the hero, I'm writing in his voice, right? So what do they mean when they talk about my voice? I'm not supposed to put my voice into stuff, am I?"

Upon further questioning, I discovered that this poor newbie writer soul had somehow deduced that the writer's "voice" had to do with dialogue. In reality, she wasn't far enough along the craft road yet to realize what people meant when they talked about "voice" rather than "how characters sound when they talk"; in cases like that, you can only steer someone toward where they can get more answers and explanation, and then hope it eventually sinks in.

The other side to that coin, however, happened one morning when our local classical music station played a theater piece by Bizet—not from *Carmen*, but from another production for which he had also written music. Within the first minute or so of hearing it, even though I've

never heard this piece before, I knew it was Bizet, and I would have known that even without the announcer telling me it ahead of time.

How? Because of the composer's *voice*.

The orchestration of woodwind lines, in this instance—their particular melodic and harmonic combinations—was a dead giveaway. I'd heard Bizet do those same things in other pieces; those things are part of his orchestral "language." If you will, they're his vocabulary, his word usage, and his turn of phrase.

Same with Beethoven and his endless codas. (Nice boy, but he can't finish anything.)

Same with Tchaikovsky and his "clouds of rosin." (Translation: lots and lots of running passages played by lots and lots of strings!)



Now, I know these “voices” partially because I’m an educated musician, but also because I’ve listened to thousands of hours of all kinds of music. This is uncannily like the training we do as writers, in which we’re told to “read widely.”

So, we do. In the process, we read millions of words by lots of different people. We learn who we can’t put down, who leaves us indifferent, and who we fervently hope will never land another contract. We learn, in other words, whose voices we enjoy.

After long consideration, and much second-guessing and trying to read between the lines of rejection letters (a totally fruitless endeavor, by the way), I’ve finally come to the conclusion that *voice* is everything.

Period.

Editors and agents mention voice, of course, when they talk about why books get their attention—but they mention it as only one in a laundry list of items they “look for.” In reality, however, no one “looks for” anything in a manuscript; one *listens* for it instead.

Which is why, in the end, what sells our books is not the beauty of our plot line, the heroism of our protagonist, or the complexity of our mysteries... but how we tell the reader about all these things. Or, put another way, how they *sound*.

Psychologists and reading experts have lots of multi-syllable terminology to describe and label this process, but in essence, when you read, something in your mind “speaks” the words to you. Your mind either likes the sound of what it hears, or it doesn’t. That’s the “spark” that grabs you...or the lack of same that leaves you cold.

And, yes, it’s as individual as your fingerprint or stride—which is why an editor, when pushed to the wall, can only shrug and say, “I can’t really tell you what grabs me until I see it.” Translate that as “hear it,” and you’re on to something.

Most of us don’t have concrete “writing” reasons for liking certain authors. We just do. The reason, boiled down, is that their voices speak to us in ways we enjoy. Only in analysis after the fact do we put official-sounding “professional” writing terms to the elements involved. But in the beginning, it’s a sensory and emotional decision, and nothing more nor less than that.

If the voice of a work speaks too slowly, seems to drag or be too shallow, you’ll get bored and distracted. If the voice is too frenetic or harsh, you have to set the book aside—either temporarily, to “catch your breath,” or permanently, because you just find the story too “rattling.” If the voice sounds too cloying, or whiny, or evokes too much pathos for what you find appropriate, you feel as if the author is in a sense “telling lies” to you; she’s speaking in terms you know are not true. Books that “fail” us in these ways end up in your giveaway pile.



But if the voice of the writer employs pleasing sounds (words that “roll off your tongue” well), relates the story in a rhythm compatible with your own internal auditory preferences (a pace at which you can travel easily), and resonates with you internally (an ending that satisfies you)—guess what? You’re probably going to like that book.

That combination of elements is what makes a “keeper” as well...because that pleasant “reading” auditory experience is one so enjoyable that most of us like to repeat it, and sometimes we’d rather go back to a familiar well and drink from it again than take the risk of drinking from a new source. Which is why once you find an author you enjoy, you tend to want to read everything she’s written—just to see if the experience is equally satisfying every time.

Which also, to me, finally explains the sense behind “branding” as well.

It’s not, as the experts keep telling us, so much that “readers like to know what to expect.” On the contrary: as a reader, I love being surprised

by an author. But I like to be surprised in a way that resonates with me, a way I understand, a way that seems “true,” and a way that doesn’t require me to change the way I listen to the author’s story too very much.

That means I need the author to speak to me in a consistent voice. If she does, I’m loyal to her and spread the word. If she doesn’t, I’m confused. And confusion, for an editor or agent, means working harder than necessary to listen to a story...which is why, if they find my voice unclear or unappealing in any way, it’s easier just to send the rejection slip and move on to something that may speak to them more clearly.

Voice. It’s everything. It’s the spark. It’s the difference.

But how to develop your own? And how to target where your listeners are?

Stay tuned. We’ll talk about that next time.



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Date: Saturday, December 7, 2024; 11:00 AM MT

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Romance Writers of America
2455 E. Sunrise Boulevard, Suite 816
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33304

Email: rwreditor@rwa.org