

Where to Begin

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I can not count the number of times I've heard something on the lines of, "I have an idea for a book. Where do I start?"

Well, unfortunately, there is no one correct or easy answer. We all learn differently and we also create differently. What I can do is provide a few pointers on making your personal journey to writing easier.

The below items are in no particular order.

Start Writing

Set a writing schedule. If it's an hour a day, fifteen minutes a day, every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday...Explain to your family that this is your "me time" and you are not to be disturbed. Now I'll be honest with you. I wake up two hours before my family rises because they kept messing in my "me time."

What do you write? Write the story that is in you. Some people like to sketch their plot and characters before they start writing the actual book. I don't usually outline, but I did with my novel Caught Up, and I outlined for my current project because I'm working with a partner.

An outline is a basic scene by scene list of what happens (the plot). Outlining is great because it's a lot easier to move things around, add, remove scenes in an outline than in a completed manuscript.

You may want to start out writing an outline of the plot. Listing a few scenes. Creating character sketches...This also applies to non-fiction. What if you were writing your life story? I'd outline the chapters.

Sometimes I don't feel like working on any of my current projects. On those days, I still write. I do what is called free writing. I sit down with my free writing journal and just write about whatever comes to my mind. Don't worry about form, syntax, rambling, running on, staying on topic...Just write. You'll be amazed at what comes to mind when you free yourself.

Read, Read, and then Read Some More

Whatever genre you want to write in, make sure you are reading books in that genre. Same goes for non-fiction. Read biographies if you want to write a biography. Now I know you are already read everything you can get your hands on, but now you are going to read with a writer's eye.

Study the books you read. Ask yourself why the author did this or that. Examine the form, syntax, style, transitions, wording...I've been an avid reader for as long as I can remember. When I wrote my first novel, I thought it would be a breeze. Shoooooot, I read all of the time. Of course I knew what I was doing. Welllll, I still have that first manuscript, and it was a breeze to write, but...umm, umm, umm. All I can do is shake my head. My sentence structure was pretty good, but speaker tags, and man did I head hop (move from one persons point of view to another too quickly). Then there's scene and chapter length...

Learn the Craft

My father is THE BEST story teller EVER. Shoooooot, you ought to hear the one he tells about how he was bitten by a great white shark when he was swimming in Decatur Lake (located in Central Illinois). Fantastic oral stories, but him translating his tales to paper... Well, let's just say something is lost in the translation.

Character development, plots and subplots, scenes and sequels, redundancy, pacing, consistency, showing vs: telling, point of view, syntax, setting, styles, dialogue, rules of the genre...

Don't panic. I know there is a lot to learn, but you don't have to be proficient in each area in a week. So how do you learn? There are several options. Most people do a combination of things. Here are a few of the ways I began learning the craft—by the way, I'm still learning. I don't think I'll ever know it all.

- Returned to college, mainly because I wanted to be a professional developmental editor. I'll be honest with you. I doubt I would have returned to college had I only wanted to be an author, which would have been my loss. If you don't wish to obtain a degree, there many colleges offer continuing education classes or the opportunity to be a student at large. I do suggest that everyone take a grammar/punctuation class every five years (I'm due for a refresher this summer). Keep the textbook from the class and reference it.
- Hired a writing coach for one-on-one instruction.

Okay, okay, I know not everyone can afford to return to college or hire a writing coach. Truth be told, I couldn't either, but I went in knowing I wanted to be a professional editor, thus invested in my career. Anywhooo, below are a few less costly ways I used to learn the craft.

- Studied books and articles on the craft of writing. I concentrated on one area at a time, and then applied it to my writing.
- Attended writing workshops and classes. Media Bistro is a great place to find classes in your area or online classes. <http://www.mediabistro.com/>
- Joined writing peer groups, ie. International Black Writers Association <http://www.blackwritersassociation.org>, Romance Writers of America <https://www.rwanational.org/eweb/StartPage.aspx>, Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America <http://www.sfwaw.org/> ...you get the picture.
- Obtained a mentor (a published author or someone further along in their writing journey).

Where to Start

Okay, so you've decided to learn the craft, but there is too much information to choose from. Well, you know I wouldn't leave you hanging. Below are a few books, links, and groups to get you started.

Books you MUST have

- Techniques of a Best Selling Writer by Dwight V. Swain—This is my favorite overall book on the craft. I've read it a few times, have pages marked, lines underlined...
- Characters Make Your Story by Maren Elwood—This is literally the best book on character development ever written. It's out of print, so you'll have to order a used one.

Other fantastic books on the craft

- Writers Digest Bookclub has TONS of great books on the craft. You could purchase one book a month and concentrate on that element of writing for the month. Check out their site. <http://www.writersdigestbookclub.com/> Here are a few of their books.
 - Characters and Viewpoint by Orson Scott Card
 - Creating Character Emotions by Ann Hood
 - Description by Monica Wood
 - Formatting and Submitting Your Manuscript by Jack and Glenda Neff, Don Prues
 - Scene and Structure by Jack M. Bickham
 - Setting by Jack M. Brickham
 - Writing Dialogue by Tom Chiarella

A few more good books

- The Weekend Novelist Writes a Mystery by Robert J. Ray and Jack Remick—This may be out of print. Purchase it used. It's a fantastic book.
- The Weekend Novelist by Robert J. Ray—they have a newer version out by Robert Ray and Brett Norris. I haven't read the new one. The old one is THE BOMB.
- The Writer's Journey 2nd Edition Mythic Structure for Writers by Christopher Vogler—This one was a little more difficult to digest, but still a great book.

Magazine

Writers Digest—Each month they have very useful articles on the craft.

NOTE: Don't forget your friendly neighborhood library for books and magazines.

Links to bookmark

- Deewrites Workshops <http://www.deewrites.com/workshops.html> LOL. Of course you have to return to see what else I have for you. Please spread the word.
- Media Bistro <http://www.mediabistro.com/> You can find great classes here, news about the industry, jobs, networking sessions...
- Publishers Weekly <http://www.publishersweekly.com> This is the main industry magazine. It's a good way to start learning who is who in the industry.

Groups to Join

- Edit Tips http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Edit_Tips/ This is a new group, but is very good. Two editors own the group and post a topic for the week. Then you ask away... These are romance editors, but most of the information is transferable to other genres.
- Real Sista Writers <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/RealSistaWriters/> Don't let the name fool you. Males are also welcome SMILE. This is a fantastic group of authors and aspiring authors who have come together to share workshops, trials and tribulations of being an author, critiquing each other's work...
- Writing Tips <http://groups.google.com/group/WritingTips> A few times a week, the owner of the list sends out workshops and links of interest to authors. Topics cover everything from writing basics to upcoming writing conferences.

Okay, that's enough for now. I don't want to cause information overload. As always, I'm around.

If you have questions, feel free to email me deatri@deewrites.com.

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