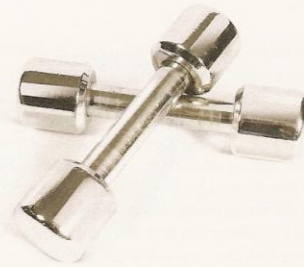


Pre- Writing workout



Author Wendy Mass teaches us how to conquer the fear of the blank page using an outlining method that works ...



The fear of the blank page has stopped many a writer from getting their words down on paper. There's nothing worse than staring at the screen, not knowing where your story's going.

Okay, there are probably SOME worse things, but for the sake of argument, let's say it's up there with public speaking and tornadoes. When I decided I wanted to write YA novels, I took every class on how to do it that I could find. I figured one of the methods would speak to me. And one did. It wasn't from college, it wasn't even from graduate school. It was from a Learning Annex class, of all places.

The class was called "How to Write a Book on Anything in Two Weeks or Less." I figured, heck, what did I have to lose? I had two weeks. Might as well write a book.

Well, the real title should have been "How to OUTLINE a Book in Two Weeks or Less." The instructor taught a method of outlining that I had never seen before.

It was fun, it was easy, and there were no Roman numerals to remind me of outlining a report in high school. They didn't even call it an outline, they called it a blueprint, which somehow sounds cooler and more appropriate.

Over the years I've tweaked the process a bit and I've used it for all of my novels. I personally feel the best way to outline (oops, I mean blueprint) a story is with pen on paper, and in this case having one notebook just for your blueprint is very helpful.

You won't want to keep going back and forth between computer documents when you begin the writing stage. The directions I'm going to give below are for writing a short story or a chapter of a novel, but you can also apply

this method to writing picture books, and even nonfiction.

In a nutshell, here is the five part process:

1. Make a list of 18 important elements you want to include in the story or chapter you are designing.
2. Cross out the three least interesting, leaving your 15 best ideas
3. Re-order the remaining ideas into the order you'd like them to fall in the story.
4. Turn each of those ideas into a question.
5. Answer that question with three words or short phrases that help you paint that scene.

As an example, I'll go through the process for blueprinting the prologue of my first novel, *A Mango-Shaped Space*, and will expand on the directions. Since the prologue is much shorter than an actual chapter, instead of coming up with 18 elements, I only needed nine.

1. MAKE A LIST OF 18 IMPORTANT ELEMENTS FOR YOUR STORY OR CHAPTER

(one word or short phrase. These are things that come to mind when you think about the events, they don't have to be in chronological order yet.)

1. grades
2. math problem
3. colored chalk
4. reveals
5. in trouble
6. reaction
7. alone
8. outcome
9. house

2. CUT THE THREE LEAST INTERESTING TO LEAVE 15
Since I only did nine for the prologue, I chose to cut two: grades and house.

3. RE-ORDER THE STORY ELEMENTS INTO THE ORDER YOU'D LIKE THEM TO FALL IN THE STORY.

1. math problem
2. colored chalk
3. reveals colors
4. reaction
5. in trouble
6. alone
7. outcome

4. CHANGE EACH OF THESE IDEAS INTO QUESTIONS

Beginning with who, what, where, why and how. For example, "colored chalk" becomes "Why was I upset about the colored chalk?"

5. ANSWER THE QUESTION WITH THREE WORDS OR SHORT PHRASES THAT HELP YOU PAINT THAT SCENE.

These can be emotions, descriptions, etc, anything that will put you back in that place when you go to write the book. For example, for the question "Why was I upset about the colored chalk?" the answers were: each number has a color, colors of the chalk are wrong, can't solve problem. (The box to the right is what my blueprint looked like at the end.)

If your goal is to write a novel, you'll add one more step to the beginning, as follows:

WRITE A LIST OF 18 MAJOR IDEAS YOU WANT TO HAPPEN IN YOUR BOOK

Then follow the first few steps as before: Cross out the weakest three, then re-order the list in the way you want to present them in the book. These 15 ideas will each represent the major theme/event of a chapter. Your list will essentially be a snapshot of the whole book, right there on one page.

Before you begin the blueprint for your chapters, write the title of each chapter on top, and you'll never have to worry about what to put in that chapter. If it doesn't relate to, or expand upon, the theme you've selected, you'll know it doesn't belong there.

It might seem like a lot of effort to do all this work ahead of time when you really want to get started writing. And once you do sit down to write, you'll likely wind up veering from the blueprint from time to time. But I promise you, armed with your blueprint, you'll be able to write much faster, and you'll be more relaxed while doing it.

Happy writing!

1. MATH PROBLEM — flashback

How did I feel standing at the blackboard in 3rd grade?

- a. awkward — costume for play too big
- b. embarrassed
- c. worried about getting it wrong

2. COLORED CHALK

Why was I upset about the colored chalk?

- a. each number has a color
- b. colors of the chalk are wrong
- c. can't solve problem

3. REVEALS COLORS

What happens when I tell people about the colors of the chalk being wrong?

- a. laughed at
- b. called freak
- c. face burns

4. REACTION

How does teacher respond?

- a. admonishes for lying
- b. principal's office
- c. parents sent for

5. IN TROUBLE

What happens in principal's office?

- a. explain that I wasn't lying.
- b. worry that I'm crazy
- c. lie, tell them I made it all up. Easier.

6. ALONE

What do I do when I get home?

- a. don't talk
- b. run through woods
- c. vow not to tell anyone about my colors again

7. OUTCOME

How do people treat me back at school?

- a. clean erasers
- b. classmates eventually forget
- c. flash forward — when I'm 13 I'll have to tell people again

About Wendy Mass:

Wendy's most recent novel is *Heaven Looks a lot Like the Mall*.
You can visit her at www.wendymass.com.