

A Writer's Toolkit

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Writing Is Like ...

Let's start by looking at a few of comparisons between writing and other kinds of things.

Nature

Nature is made of fractals, and book is a fractal too. You're a plant and the book is the flower you grow.

A fractal is a structure which has many levels of detail, with interesting new features occurring at each level. Nature is full of fractals: mountains, trees, coastlines, the arrangements of the stars in the sky. Just about every kind of animal or plant can be thought of as a fractal: the body, the parts, the organs, the organelles, the processes, the cells, the zillion little structures inside the cells, the biomolecules that make up the pieces of the cells. Making fractals is how Nature grows things. Big things are built up from small.

It really helps to think of the book you're writing as a fractal. The levels are the novel as a whole, the novel's parts, the chapters in the parts, the scenes in the chapters, the actions within a scene, the sentences describing the actions, the phrases in the sentences, and the words in the phrases. To write at the top of your form, you need to be effectively working each level, either consciously or with the unconscious craftsmanship that comes with practice.

Saying it again, I quote from an earlier note I wrote about fractality. I think about the letter level (how to spell the words, especially the dialect and the neologisms), about the word level (the *mot juste*, the *synecdoche*), the phrase (the right cadence, the assonance, the consonance, the *synecdoche*, the *litotes*), the sentence (the right idea at the right time), the grouping of sentences (the rhetorical play of parallelism and chiasmus), the paragraph (each should be its own little cartoon panel), the page (shuffling the paragraphs together into a dialog-like order), the scene (squeeze the most humor and strangeness out of it), the chapter (get a meaningful development of a character from A to B in the course of a chapter), the novel (grow the whole broccoli stalk up to a seemly shape with a solid rockin' plot), the series (the dynasty-like progress of the families, the time-bound seasoning and perfecting of my style), the oeuvre (the compare and contrast of the varying forms and media, the reillumination of my persistent themes).

Drawing and Painting

In 1998 I was working on an odd book called *Saucer Wisdom* which included a lot of drawings, supposedly made by saucer abductee Frank Shook. Given that the drawings weren't supposed to be by a professional artist, the publisher let me draw them myself, which I enjoyed. Working on the drawings, I began seeing a lot of analogies between drawing and writing.

(i) In drawing I make a quick sketch in pencil, then ink it in, then white out certain pieces and redraw them. In writing I try and write a rough version of the section pretty quickly, then go over it and tune it, and then there will be things that don't work that I have to keep redoing.

(ii) In drawing, whenever there is a part I'm confused about (like two hands holding each other) I end up having to use lots and lots of white-out there, and the surface ends up all bumpy and cruffy on the paper and never does look as smooth and clean as the rest of the picture. This is the same in writing, the transitions or actions I'm not clear about take the most rewriting and reworking. But I don't think it's necessarily true that a rewritten patch has to be bumpy and cruffy as does a redrawn patch; the bumpiness is partly a result simply of the not-so-great physical properties of the white-out I use.

(iii) In drawing I'd sometimes think that if only I could take the time to fully visualize the difficult passage then I'd be able to draw it clean and right the first time. But often it just seemed too hard to think, and I'd go ahead and draw it wrong, just so I could have something to work off of. In writing I think that if only I could fully think a scene through I can write it much more effectively. But many times it's just too hard to think the whole scene through, I feel like being active, in touch with the medium, so I go ahead and write even though I'm not sure what I'm doing.

(iv) In both cases I need to be clear when something that might have the superficial appearance of a finished piece really is still just a sketch that needs to be reworked. I was kind of surprised how prolonged is the process of making a drawing; I hadn't realized it would take so much revision. By long experience, I am of course familiar with the huge amount of revision a written scene takes. But it's good to see this confirmed by my experience with drawing.

(v) My cartoonist friend Paul Mavrides said about my drawings, and cartooning in general, "It's not the realistic style that matters so much. It's having something to say." And this insight makes me feel free to write a little more cartoony and sketchy sometimes. And it helps me fight my feeling of being inferior to a fine literature exponent who creates beautifully textured descriptions and aperçus (shading and perspective!) in a work that perhaps doesn't have as much to say as I hope mine do.

(vi) I got a deeper appreciation of the concept of "eyeball kicks," as exemplified in cartoons such as Well Elder's work in *Mad* magazine or in Walt Kelly's *Pogo*. Elder's eyeball kicks are, to me, of a piece with the piled-on detail of Bosch's teeming works. A higher apotheosis is reached in the later Brueghel where there is still very much action, but the surface doesn't teem, it is harmonious and integrated. These guys have always been touchstone icons for the kind of novels I want to write. Ideally each chapter of a novel can be like a single canvas.

Music

In the early days of cyberpunk SF writing, it was common to compare one's writing to rock'n'roll. Partly this was a you-wish kind of self-aggrandizement. But there is something to the notion of writing as music.

At a cerebral level, a piece of music often has the type of fractal structure we expect to see in good writing. There's an overall theme, movements, catchy hooks, musical phrases, individual notes.

In another way, we might think of your plan for a novel as a score that's performed by an orchestra composed of your characters. The catch is that you need to race around and personally emulate the behavior of each of your musicians. A novel would thus be more like an orchestral piece recorded by one person laying down layer upon layer of tracks.

The most romantic image connecting music and writing is of course that of the soloist: saxophonist, vocalist, electric guitarist. Working in the SF genre gives me access to certain classic themes: robots, UFOs, expanded consciousness, bizarre weaponry, flight, time-travel, hideous aliens, and so on. I tend to think of these as being like beloved rock'n-roll chords, power chords, "God chords." Even if you're not working in SF, there's a wider set of patterns that occur over and over: the lover's quarrel, the mysterious stranger, the unexpected visitor, the chance meeting, the crisis, and so on.

Software Engineering

Let's focus on just one aspect of software engineering: design patterns.

Software applications have gotten so big and unwieldy that software engineers keep trying to think of more and more high-level ways to describe the projects they work on. In recent years there's been a fad for design patterns. The fad was inspired by, of all things, Christopher Alexander's *The Timeless Way of Building*, which is a book about architecture. Not *software* architecture, house and city-planning architecture.

There's been a big push among software engineers to identify the patterns that are used in successful software. For instance, the notion of having a web page that different individuals can access is variously called the Observable-Observer, Publisher-Subscriber, or Document-View pattern — with the different names depending on whether it's a normal web page, a web page that sends you email to alert you when it's updated, or a web page that allows you to enter information (such as in a guest-book) that can then be viewed by others.

Joseph Campbell's classic *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* is a very fine attempt to pick out some of the essential patterns that underlie epic stories. He distinguishes seventeen stages in mankind's various myths and legends. I myself just used these stages as the chapters of an epic SF novel called *Frek and the Elixir*, so I can rattle them right off: the Call To Adventure, the Refusal of the Call, the Helper, Crossing the Threshold, the Belly of the Whale, the Road of Trials, the Goddess, the Temptress, Atonement with the Father, Apotheosis, the Boon, Refusal of the Return, the Flight, Rescue from Without, Master of two Worlds, and Freedom to Live.

Belly of the Whale sounds kind of far-fetched, but when you look at, say, SF novels, you'll see that very many of them have a section where the characters travel somewhere inside some other entity (either a ship or an alien leech or cuttlefish).

Other people have talked about much simpler kinds of patterns, like the adage (coined by John Gardner?) that there are only two plots: someone goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town. And there's the boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-gets-girl pattern. And the love triangle. And the romantic square: two couples meet, swap partners, and one gets back together but the other couple doesn't; this was my plot for *Spaceland*.

Although it sounds nice and creative to say, "I'm going to set my characters loose and see what develops," that's not always such a great plan. Reality TV is interesting exactly to the extent that the situations we see happen to lock into archetypal patterns. So it's good to have a pattern in mind.

Getting Started

Title

It's important to pick a good title, and the first couple you think of may not be the right ones. Spend some time making lists of possible titles, and come back to this activity every now and then.

Try out your title on people. If you have to repeat it before they understand it, maybe it's not a good title. You want a strong, brand-name kind of a title. On the other hand, if the title's slightly unfamiliar, maybe it'll stick better in people's minds.

There are a variety of traditional title forms. Guides like this often use the "How To..." format. For thrillers, there's the "The Proper-Name Name" format, like *The Bourne*

Identity. There's the one-jolting-word format, like *Misery*. There's the literary quote format, like *All Things Great and Small*. There's the gerund format, like *Letting Go*. The fantasy epic format "The Color-Descriptor Power-Object of Weird-Place-Name." here's no need to embrace or avoid the formats, but you should be aware of which standard format, if any, you're using.

It's also a good idea to choose a title that hasn't been used before. Run a quick search of Amazon or, better, of a library's catalog to see if your title's been used very often before. Generally speaking you are free to reuse someone's title, as titles can't be copyrighted or trademarked. But reusing a title is IMHO a sleazy, pin-headed thing to do.

Before calling these notes *A Writer's Toolkit*, I did a quick web search and didn't find it, although there is a *Tools for Writing*. Other titles I considered: *How To Write* (promises too much and is overly hard-sell), *Thoughts About How To Write* (sounds timid and is too long), *Fractal Writing* (makes no sense to most people.)

The Notes Document

It's useful on most projects, particularly longer ones, to work with two documents: the **Book.doc** that you're writing and a **Book Notes.doc**. Of course "Book" is replaced by some version of the title of the story, article, or book you're working on. In the case of a short story you might not bother with two separate documents and might just keep the notes at the end of the story document.

The point of the distinction is that you accumulate a lot of written material that won't be directly in your book, and the notes document is a good place to keep it. A less obvious reason for doing this is that some days, or at some times of day, you won't feel inspired or energetic enough to work on your book or story. At times like this, it's often comfortable to work on the notes document instead. The notes are just for you, and you don't have to worry too much about what you put in there.

Many writers will maintain a third document with a name like **Journal.doc**, this is where they write things that don't relate to the writing project at all, possibly copying a few bits back and forth between **Journal.doc** and **Book Notes.doc**.

You might sometimes think of your notes document like this. You're a magpie putting together a nest. You pick up shiny things in your beak and carry them home. The Notes document is the ledge where you accumulate your goodies for weaving into your Book nest.

Break your Notes up into sections by formatting a title line of each section differently, maybe even using several kinds of heading formats. Here are some sections you might put in your Notes.

If you want to see two specific examples of Notes documents, you can see my notes for *Spaceland* at <http://www.cs.sjsu.edu/faculty/rucker/spaceland.htm>, and you can see my notes for *As Above, So Below: A Novel of Peter Bruegel* at <http://www.rudyrucker.com/bruegel/bruegelnotes.htm>.

On Deck

Often there will be unsolved questions about your story or characters, problems you still have to resolve. Keep a little list of these at the start of your Notes document where they jump out at you. Keep coming back to the questions and thinking about them.

Outline

A lot of writers never do write in advance a complete outline for any story, novel, or nonfiction book they write. Some people are able to do a complete outline, but many of us are not. Getting too hung up on creating a complete outline can become a stumbling block.

This said, it's still a good idea to have some idea of what you want to do. This harks back to what I said earlier about design patterns. We'll say still more about this in our section on Finding Your Story. For now, here are some subheadings you might have in your outline section. I'll say more about some of these things below.

Target Scenes. (Sometimes I use a "cross-country" hike method of composition, simply picking out some high points I want to get to, no matter how.)

Summary. (Keep this in mind for use in pitching the book.)

Three Act Structure. (If you ever want a movie deal, you're gonna need three acts.)

Chapter by Chapter Description. (It's nice to work this out in some detail before you start the chapter, keeping in mind that you will repeatedly revise the description as the chapter develops.)

Plan for Next Scene. (To help sketch out what to write next.)

Journal

This section is for notes relating to your journey through the book. Start each entry with the date, and write current thoughts about the writing project. How you feel about the project, why you want to do it, what might go into it, things you might try, things you don't want to try, what the arc of the story should be like. Unlike a normal diary-like journal, you don't record your daily type thoughts and events, but don't worry too much if you do type them in. Later you can always copy and paste and move the non-writing stuff over into your **Journal.doc**.

Sketches

This is a place for accumulating short descriptions of things that you see. Keep a pen and a folded-in-four piece of paper with you. Make brief sketches in words of interesting things. Like if you see someone striking on the street, or hear someone say something memorable, or have a sudden inspiration, jot it down so you don't forget it. Then when you get to your computer you can add this to your Sketches section. Sometimes you might sit in a coffee shop and sketch the people around you. (Don't stare at them too obviously while you're writing and chuckling, or they'll freak out.) Later you can use the sketch material for making scenes richer by pasting right in. Or you can use sketch bits for describing characters. Or you can use sketch quotes to make characters' speech more colorful.

Don't bother sketching anything that you hear or see on TV, only first-hand observation is of use to you as a writer, only first-hand experience or original imaginings are interesting to a reader.

Avoid copying other books too. Copy life instead. Use dreams, fantasies. Make it fresh. Again: be a magpie.

Phrases

You can equally well put overheard phrases in this section. Here you put whatever phrases you would like to use. Things you think of, things you see, things you hear or perhaps read. Just separate them with skipped lines.

Made-up words go in here, too. Making up good SF words is an art unto itself. You'll often need a word for some future tech, or an alien race, or a place, or a futuristic state of mind. Or some nice futuristic slang. God knows you don't want people to be saying things are "cool," in 3003. I tend to free-associate when I'm trying to make up a word. I'll just write down possibility after possibility, as fast as I can. And then I'll study what I came up with and this time take my analysis even below the world level and look at the roots of the words, at their associations. Word roots are powerful ur-buttons of the psyche. Try and be conscious of your choices.

Chunks

You might feel inspired to write up some possible scenes for your story out of order. Save them here as chunks. Separate the chunks with titles (format them as Heading 2 in MS Word). You can move blocks back and forth between the Chunks section of *Notes on Book.doc* and *Book.doc*.

The Chunks section is also a good place to accumulate discarded fragments. Once you've written something into your novel, you tend to not want to take it back out. It's yours, it's precious, you made it! But often you will have put in expository lumps or foreshadowings of events that don't in fact materialize, and this stuff has to go. Pasting the cuttings into your Notes document is a good way to make it psychologically easier. That way, it's not like you're erasing your work.

Characters

Put a subsection for each character. You can cut and paste from here into your story. What do they look like. Where are they from, things they might say, etc.

Timeline

It's usually a good idea to have a specific date in mind for your action. Look in your computer's calendar and pick a specific day. You should know not only the month, but the day of the week it is when something is happening, as the time of year and the day of the week color the way real life happens. If your events run over an extended period of time, a timeline gets really useful. All you need is a series of dates with a note of the event next to them.

Locales

You can invent some locales in your stories, but it's good to often use real locations. Think of it as being like a movie filmed on location. Make notes on some specific places, or draw little maps for yourself (maps are one thing that are easier to keep on paper rather than in a computer file).

Special Topics

Depending on the kind of book you're writing, you can put in any number of sections on things of particular interest to you. You can accumulate relevant topics there; by keeping them in "bins" like this, you make it possible to find them later. I'll just mention two kinds of examples that relate to science-fiction: Technology and Society.

Technology

If you're writing science fiction, you're going to need some tech ideas. Try and put in oddball twists on actual tech rather than just listing existing things. Don't worry too much if you don't know how something will work, you can always make up some bogus explanation later. The important thing is what the gimmick *does*. You might these entries individual subheading titles and then you can easily come back and add to the various entries.

Society

If you're writing science fiction, your story takes place, perhaps, in a future or alien society. You need to go to some trouble to make it have a different feel. In the society section you accumulate ideas about the politics, culture, economy, whatever. A good way to get these ideas is to notice odd things about your current society and to exaggerate them a bit.

Even if you're not writing science fiction, you may well want to think about the aspects of society that you want to focus on.

The Lead

One of the key things to getting a story started is to write the first few sentences or paragraphs --- what a journalist would call the lead.

Look at a story anthology, and focus on the first few paragraphs of each story.

A lead should kind of zing you. It sets a hook that poses a question you want to know the answer to.

But it shouldn't sound too much like a lead, either. I recently picked up a book of stories where the leads were too exquisitely crafted. Reading each one, you could almost here a *badda-bim* rim-shot. "'I'm hungry,' said the corpse." It's a delicate thing.

It's tricky to start going and not stumble over a big block of exposition right away. It's always uncool, I mean geevey, to have expository lumps, these can stop a reader dead.

The lead is one of those scary places in writing where you are to some extent relying on magical inspiration. On the muse. But don't wait too long. Start by trying the very first thing that pops into your head. Go with that and if you can't make it work, try another.

P.O.V.

It's always necessary to decide on the point of view *and stick to it*. In principle it would seem possible to adopt any of six possible viewpoints: I, you, he/she/it, we, you all, they.

The most common is third person singular. There are 2 kinds of 3rd person viewpoints. One is a close-in viewpoint where you are so close to some one individual that you're in a position to describe his/her thoughts. "Jack got up. He was thinking about Edna. He imagined her green ponytails once again. Green like daffodil leaves."

In the close-in 3rd person viewpoint you should usually only be able to see *one* person's thoughts per chapter. Otherwise you get a drifting confusing effect. It's legitimate to switch from chapter to chapter to get a rotating, kaleidoscopic effect. But it's distracting to try and switch viewpoint from scene to scene within a chapter; it gives the reader the unsettling impression that you don't know what you're doing.

The other kind of 3rd person viewpoint is more distant and isn't used so often. "Jack got up. He walked to the window and looked outside. He turned and walked across the room. His lips moved a bit, as he murmured, 'Edna.'"

A really easy viewpoint to manage is 1st person singular. "I got up. I was thinking about Edna, her green daffodil-bunch ponytails." Many find writing in this P. O. V. natural, although there are some, more self-effacing, souls who have a hard time getting themselves to write first person. Note that the 1st person character isn't necessarily the same person as you, the 1st person narrator can be quite different from the author, indeed should be somewhat different. Usually it's wiser to make your character *less* powerful than you imagine yourself to be. Superheroes are boring.

A rarely used viewpoint is 2nd person singular. It can be done close in like: "You get up. You miss Edna. For some wacky reason her hair reminds you of daffodil leaves." 2nd person can also be done at a distance, where the "you" become in some sense a camera. In daily speech, we sometimes use this 2nd person P. O. V. when describing a movie to someone. "You see a car upside down, you zoom in closer and you see this pale white hand hanging out of the window. You figure it's a no-survivor situation, but then all of a sudden the hand spreads its fingers and waves, 'Hi.' And then this face of a woman with clown make-up and green pony-tails pokes out of the window and she starts talking to you about ..." The telling-a-movie mode is useful to keep in mind if you try and write this way. Don't try writing this P. O. V. unless you've thought about it a lot and you have a lot of writing experience. Rarely it is used at novel length, one of the few books like this that come to mind is Jay McInerney, *Bright Lights Big City*.

Not many writers have ever used plural viewpoints. For a certain bizarre hive-mind effect you could maybe do a 1st person plural narrator. "We woke and realized that our goal was to devour the planet Earth." Has anyone ever used 2nd person plural? Maybe for some portentous kind of thing, "You Earthlings grew from the dust and prospered. You labored long and hard..." Hard to see how that could ever lead to any action, though. Perhaps there could be a 3rd person plural hive-mind story. "They came and saw that Earth was good. Yum yum, they ate it all. For they were the killer space-ants."

Tense

The standard is past tense.

I've always wanted to write a novel in present tense, but editors resist it. Literary types have a better chance of getting away with this than SF writers do.

I don't think anyone's ever written a novel in the future tense. "They will do this, they will do this, and you will go to sleep."

Finding Your Story

Target Scenes

I mentioned target scenes before. A target scene is like a landmark you want to get to during the hike of your story. It's your goal. Sometimes you'll start with the target scene (brain-eating robots!) and worry about the how and why of it later.

Examples are things that fascinate or obsess you, things that you'd really like to see or experience.

Summary

Your summary should be something that you can pitch to an editor to try and sell them the book. Something that might look work as the flap copy of a book, that is, as the plot summary that gets people to want to buy and read it.

It's good to come back and look at your summary every now and then, lest you lose track of what the theme and tone of your book are supposed to be! If it's changed and you're happy with the change, then change the summary so it's still in synch with what you're doing.

The Novel's Structure

Movie people always view stories in terms of three acts. We can learn from them.

The flow is something like Introduction, Development, Resolution. Girl meets Boy, Girl loses Boy, Girl gets Boy.

Often there are big actions separating the acts.

Act I) Set up, breakthrough, development. Leads to ---->Reversal.

Act II) Increasing difficulties and complications. Leads to ----> A Plan.

Act III) Executing the steps of the solution. The final harmony (or discord).

Think beyond the Three Acts. Think of Patterns. Campbell's Monomyth, other works (you *can* copy patterns), Romance.

Chapter By Chapter Description

Tends to be sketchy at first.

Try and write at least a sentence for each chapter description before starting. As you move forward, keep fattening up the approaching chapter descriptions.

Maze linkages. You often don't know fully the plot in advance. It's good to have foreshadowings and have things coming together. It's not hard to link back and put the appearance of this in. It takes surprisingly few words. Like erasing a wall in hand-drawn maze to put a door where you need it.

Scenes.

Depending how you slice it, a chapter might have one or half a dozen scenes. You want to make each scene kind of self-contained. Your chapter description might have a one or two sentence summary of each scene. Sometimes I put numbered paragraphs inside my chapter description to keep this straight.

Visualize each scene as happening, so that you see it, and it breaks up into actions.

A technique for developing a scene is to put in an obstacle. A complication. Exactly the opposite happens of what your characters would want, and then they have to work around it. In terms of the image of a hand-drawn maze, it's like adding a wall that forces you to go the long way round.

Put more abstractly, if your character wants to get from A to B, you should often mess things up by putting in a C. This actually adds an extra scene. For now instead of an (A->B) scene, you now have (A->C) and (C->A). Which is usually a good thing.

Actions.

The small bits of scenes, only a few paragraphs. This happened, then that, then the other ... each is an action. Normally you conceptualize an action whole. An action is the building block of plotting.

Normally the part where you spend the most work is figuring out the scenes. The sequence of actions follow out of that.

What to Write Next?

Use logic. What follows from what's happened so far? What needs to happen to prepare for the things you have planned?

If you can't write on your story, write on your notes.

Try to read what you have to friends, and listen to their questions.

Sometimes you only need the next action, not the next scene. The next action idea is like you're looking at a cliff and figuring out how to climb up it. Do this, then this, then this.

Stay open to every possible influence, be a sensitive antenna, and you'll pick something up.

When you're writing a novel you're working at the most extreme limit of your capabilities. What you're doing is beyond logic, so far out at the limits of what you can do that there's no hope of your having a short and manageable simulation of the process by which to figure out what you're doing, it's computationally irreducible. When you get into this zone, out on the very surface of your brain, you become sensitive to the tiniest chaotic emanations of the world outside. At times it feels as if the world, feeling your sensitivity, gladly dances back. Dosie-do. Keep your eyes peeled.

Revising

Reread what you've written, make corrections, type those in, and hopefully the momentum will carry you into the next action or even the next scene. Like painting a wall, you keep pulling the paint out across the painted region onto the raw part.

Work on your chapter outline, play with ideas and structures, move things around. Periodically back off and look at the big picture.

If you have a completely wild, crazy idea, it's often a good idea to go with it. Break up the expectations. But, sometimes you make a mistake. Don't be afraid to backtrack, to fix what you've messed up. Remember, you can save the discarded material into your Notes document.

Sometimes when I'm at a loss for what to do in a chapter, I find myself putting in things that I meant to save for a later chapter. This is a bad idea. Like deficit spending. Let

the chapter grow its own fractal complications. If you steal from the future chapters, then you're going to disturb the structure of the book.

Full court press.

Think about your story a lot. In bed before sleeping, in the morning when you awake. In traffic. Out jogging. Walking. It's more fun than thinking about your personal problems and the state of the world at large! You might as well believe that your book is as important than the daily news. IMHO, at a cosmic yogic level, it really is.

Sketch both in words and *drawings*. It helps to draw diagrams of your story, or even sketches of scenes. Generally you should always take the time to draw a floor plan of a room that your characters are in. It doesn't have to be beautiful, but doing it is a way of focusing your mind and making the scene real. When I'm stuck, even the cruddiest little sketch can help.

Revising

Sometimes to grow the arch of the story out further you need to go back and strengthen the foundation. To make your arch bigger, you need to buttress the base more. To cantilever a deck further out over the void you have to fatten it up nearer the wall, add more support beams to it.

Appendix A: Word Processing

Two Rules

You don't *have* to use a word processor. Before about 1985, everyone wrote on typewriters, and before that they wrote by hand. But word processors make life a lot easier.

Which one to use? A lot of people use Microsoft Word running on a Mac or Windows personal computer. If you have strong emotional feelings against Microsoft, as some people do, use a different word processor. But it makes life easier to use a reasonably modern one, with a graphical user interface, a good set of features, and ability to save your files in commonly used formats like Word or Rich Text Format. I myself have some issues with Microsoft — who doesn't? — but I use their word processor anyway. It's well-designed, flexible, and very widespread. Whatever you use, remember that the point is writing, not arguing about word processors!

The first rule of using word processors is always to keep a couple of extra copies of your document. Every now and then — not very often, but often enough to matter — something will happen that makes your working file unusable or unavailable, and then you'll be glad to have a recent back-up to fall back on. I never get up from a day's writing without saving my document both to my hard disk and to something else like a floppy, a Zip disk, or a networked laptop. And I always have an up-to-date print-out as well.

Do frequent saves while you're going along. All sorts of unexpected things can end your session, power failure, kicking out the wall-plug, one of your programs freezing up your machine, a piece of your computer breaking, etc. If you've been saving every five or ten minutes you won't lose much. In Microsoft Word, the keyboard shortcut Ctrl+S saves your document, I make a habit of hitting this whenever I've written a few lines that I feel good about, just to be sure.

We've all heard the story of the budding writer who loses the files and print-outs of his/her first novel. "Lose" is the operative word here. A real writer can't countenance the possibility of a world without his/her book!

The second rule of using word processors is that you need to learn how to use them. It takes time, it takes patience, it takes the ability to get over a few disappointments, and a willingness to try a few different things. It really is useful to look at the Help files, though many people have trouble doing this. There almost always is some way to do whatever it is you want to do. Using the Help files can be very useful.

Admittedly, reading little Help windows feels somehow rushed. But you can learn to be a little more comfortable with help if you take a little time to learn how to use the toolbar on the Help viewer. And, yes, I realize this sounds like the start of an infinite regress, learning how to use Help so you can use Help to learn how to use your word processor. You also might buy a book about your word processor, keep it near your desk, and browse in it every now and then.

Enough rules, let's talk tools.

Document Basics

Here's five things you want to do make a document easy to use.

- 1) Put the date of the latest update at the start of the document (so you don't mix versions up).
- 2) Keep an updated word count at the start of the document (good for gauging progress!)
- 3) Format your chapter and section titles differently from your text (makes the View | Outline mode work, also good for table of contents).
- 4) Make a table of contents.
- 5) Use page numbers.

In Microsoft Word, you can do these tasks pretty easily. I'll give a little computer-manual-type info here. When I write a sequence of capital words with | between them, this means I'm talking about successively deeper layers of menu and dialog controls. After you click on the first control named, you'll see a pop-up menu or a dialog with the second name, then you select that and so on.

(1 & 2) You can insert the date and the word count by inserting "fields". Put in the date with Insert | Field | Date. Put in the word count with Insert | Field | Document Information | Word Count.

A "field" in your document will update itself whenever you select it and press the F9 key.

(3) You can format your chapter titles with Format | Style | Heading 1, and you can use Format | Style | Heading 2 for subsections and so on. You have to select a whole line for these formats to "take".

(4) If your chapter and sections headings have Heading style formats, then Insert | Index and Tables... | Table of Contents will automatically list them with the page number they start on.

(5) You can use View | Header and Footer | Insert Page Numbers to get pagination. I like to put my page numbers in the Footer, and in the Header put my name, the book title, with a Date field to show the latest revision date, using a small font for the header information. But a lot of people like to do it the other way around, the page numbers at the top, and document information at the bottom.

Lines and Paragraphs

Don't use carriage returns (ENTER) at the ends of your lines, let the word processor wrap the lines. Only use ENTER to start a new paragraph or to skip a line. Otherwise your text will be hard to format, like if you've ended each line with ENTER, then when you add a few words to a line in the middle of the paragraph, you get a back line break and have to fix the whole paragraph.

Speaking of line breaks, it's a good practice to use Tools | Options | View | Formatting Marks | Paragraph marks and maybe Tools | Options | View | Formatting Marks | Tab characters as well. When you first start using a word processor, the way lines break can seem like a mystery, and it helps to see the paragraph symbols there in the text. After a little experience, they stop being distracting.

As for indenting, you can either indent each paragraph with a tab or, which is in the long run easier, use Format | Style | Normal | Modify... | Format | Paragraph | Special | First Line | 0.5 to make your text automatically indent after each ENTER or Paragraph mark.

Cutting and Pasting

Something a writer does a *lot* is to cut, copy and paste text. Get very good at doing this. (i) To select a piece of text to copy (or to cut) left click the mouse at the beginning and drag the mouse to the end of the desired text. Dragging is bad for your hands, so instead you can select a block of text like this: use the arrow keys to move the cursor to the start, then hold down the SHIFT key and use the arrow keys to move the cursor to the end of the text. CTRL + Arrow key jumps the cursor a word at a time. (ii) Cutting or copying the text puts it onto an invisible "clipboard." Cutting removes it from the document, copying leaves it there. It's simplest to use CTRL+X to cut and CTRL+C to copy. (iii) You can only paste after you've done a cut or a copy. To Paste in Windows you click the cursor where you want the material to appear, or move it there with the arrow keys. And then it's The you use Edit | Paste. OR you right click and select Paste on the floating menu. OR you use SHIFT+INS. OR you use CTRL+V.

Note that you can select a block of text in one document, copy it, and then paste it into a different document. If you know you want to copy all of a document, you can select Edit | Select All OR use Ctrl + A and then copy.

If you forget these shortcut keys, you can always see them on the Edit menu.

Spell Checking

The default spell and grammar settings of Word are obtrusive and even user hostile. Whenever you work with Word, make sure to open the Tools | Options | Spelling and Grammar dialog and turn off these three boxes: *Check spelling as you type*, *Check grammar as you type*, *Check grammar with spelling*. You should only have to do this once, Word will remember your settings. And now it won't interrupt you with stupid nit-picking advice when you're trying to be creative. I always use Help | Hide Office Assistant as well.

If you feel really uneasy about your grammar you might leave the third one, but it can quite inhibiting and get you into an unpleasant adversary relationship with your word processor. You don't want to feel like your tool is arguing with you! Better to find your grammar errors yourself, or let your editor (should you be so fortunate) do it. Or turn on

grammar checking once, when you're about done with your document, and then go through it to find possible mistakes.

Of course you do want to use your spell checker regularly, when you are in that mental mode. Maybe each day when you're starting or ending your writing. Spell-checking a document is sometimes a way to get yourself started on it again.

It's not a bad idea to make a special custom dictionary with a name like **book.dic** for your spell-checker to use with book in addition to the standard dictionary. The custom dictionary can be a place to save the proper nouns, and non-standard, slang, or made-up words. The reason to save these off into a separate file is that then you can move the dictionary file around with your document and your notes file, like putting all three on your laptop for awhile, then bringing them back to your desktop machine.

Exercises

- (1) Look at the story leads of all the stories in some collection you like.
- (2) See what the P.O.V. is for these stories (you don't necessarily have to read them to find this out!)
- (3) Start working on your Notes document. Try and put something in at least five of the sections (you can use the sections I suggest and you can add ones of your own if you like).
- (4) Write three short leads for a story (a few sentences each)
- (5) Take the lead you like best and cast it in both 1st and as 3rd person versions to see how the two different P. O. V. s feel.

References

- (1) If you're interested in writing science-fiction, you might get a copy of Rudy Rucker, *Seek!*, Four Walls Eight Windows 1999 and read the essays, "A Transrealist Manifesto," and "What SF Writers Want."
- (2) This is a really encouraging book on writing, though maybe it has a little too much about Annie. Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, (Anchor Books 1994).
- (3) There's no use fighting it, this little classic is the best style guide ever. William Strunk and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, (Fourth Edition, Allyn and Bacon, 2000).