

Planning, Writing, and Marketing a Series

Stan C. Smith

Why write a series?

Many of the most beloved and successful books are written in series. *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Harry Potter*, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and many more.

Readers love series! Why? Because we become attached to great characters, and we can follow those characters through more adventures and life-changing events. *Hint: a great series must have great characters.*

Books in series are *easier to market*. Why?

- Readers want more of a good thing! If they like Book 1, they want to read Book 2.
- You can promote the heck out of Book 1 (including discounting it or making the ebook version free... the easiest and least expensive form of advertising).
- The value of *read-through* makes it much easier to have profitable advertising. By advertising only *one* book (the first in your series), you are really advertising *all* the books.
- Amazon helps you sell your series (series bundles, series pages, etc.).
- You can create *series box sets*, which readers love.
- You can create a *reader magnet* (a free prequel or other related short book), which is used to gain new readers.

Example of the power of series marketing: Some authors have gone so far as to take their standalone books and put them into a series on Amazon! Example: [Scott Standalones](#)

Two basic types of series:

Finite series

A multi-book series that follows one story arc through two or more books. The story arc is too big for one book. The books are usually read in order.

Examples: George R. R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire*, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*
My *Diffusion* series, *Bridgers* series, and *Across Horizons* series

Infinite series

A multi-book series where each book is self-contained but follows the same characters. The books stand alone and can be read in any order.

Examples: Sue Grafton's *Kinsey Millhone* series, Lee Child's *Jack Reacher*
My upcoming *Fused* series

Kinsey Milhone, Jack Reacher, and Bobby have a fresh challenge in each of the books.

These two types of series require different planning approaches

- Writing a *Finite* series is similar (in many ways) to writing one long novel.
- Writing an *Infinite* series requires less planning for the overall story arc, but you need to show your character growing some in each book.

It's better to *plan* a series before you write the first book than to write a book and then decide to turn it into a series

Although this can be done... my *Diffusion* series was done this way, as opposed to *Bridgers* and *Across Horizons*. At the time that I wrote *Diffusion*, I didn't know any better.

Some genres are better suited to series than others

Perhaps the best genres for series are Fantasy, Science Fiction, Crime/Mystery, Thriller, Historical Fiction, and Children's/Young Adult.

Romance? Well, romances usually have an HEA (happily ever after), so you would need to be creative, such as a group of friends in a small town, each of them finding love in one of the books.

Rule #1: You must have enough story to make a series!

Remember, each book must be packed full of original and stunning surprises, *not* stuffed with filler.

Does your story idea have enough meat to fill a series?

Is there extensive character development, world-building and subplots within your main plot?

If not, can you expand it into an epic, series-worthy story?

Rule #2: Each book must be a complete story, even if it is part of a *Finite* series!

Readers love series, but they do *not* love incomplete books.

Cliffhangers can be okay (depending on the genre), but only if you have already completed a story arc within the book, with a beginning, middle, and end. The cliffhanger can hint at the *next* big challenge, after the main challenge if the book has been overcome.

Each book must have a satisfying ending.

Cliffhangers are controversial, so approach with caution! Some readers like them, other hate them.

Rule #3: Your series encyclopedia is even more important than a novel encyclopedia!

When writing a series, it's even *more* difficult to keep track of all the character, plot, and world details.

Important: All this information needs to be at your fingertips!! Come up with a system.

This is why I like Scrivener (I keep all the previous books open in Scrivener, and I regularly do entire-book text searches).

Continue adding to your character profiles. Keep a cumulative list of new characters, where they were introduced, and their importance.

For the sake of *series continuity*, pay close attention to the following:

- The names and descriptions of minor characters.
- Characters' motivations.
- Key events (such as birthdays, anniversaries and other pivotal moments).
- Character language and phrasing (how they express themselves) – Skyra measures time in breaths, days, and seasons. She does not understand what "I'm sorry" means. Lincoln rarely cusses, but Derek cusses frequently.
- Character habits.
- Character details – Virgil wears glasses (you cannot leave them out of an action scene). Jazzlyn has a prosthetic hand (which hand? Left. It must be included in the story, or the reader will think you forgot about it).
- Ideals they hold about themselves, their world and their future.
- The overall story arc.
- Events that have already occurred.
- Phrases already spoken (the *Find* feature is your friend!).

- Metric vs. English (more important than you think).
- Spellings of specific words (footwraps, waist-skin, birthmate, etc.).
- The physical description of your *fictional world*.
 - What types of people live there? (how do they look, how do they dress, what are their beliefs)
 - What type of language is spoken there?
 - What's considered normal?
 - What are social classes and how do they engage with each other?
 - What do they believe about wealth, poverty?
 - What type of government do they have?
 - And much more...

Rule #4: Keep growing your characters

- Especially in a *Finite* series, but also even if it is an *Infinite* series.
- You can't end the books with something like, "They lived happily ever after" because why would the reader want to read the next book?
- Each book should have a satisfying ending, but you want the reader to think: *Are they really going to stay happy?* (this isn't by accident... the author intentionally inserts something that makes the reader wonder this). Remember the tips about *cliffhangers* from earlier.

Rule #5: Don't tell the same story again and again

This is the *Scooby Doo approach*. The character(s) run into the same kind of trouble, then they overcome it with the same kind of determination and sarcasm. This gets repetitive.

- How to avoid:
 - Have your character grow and change throughout the series (you can show different sides of them in each book, for example). In this way the overall story becomes a story of the evolution of your character.
 - Plan each book as a different piece of a large over-arching story (*Finite* series especially)
 - Add new characters in each book. Some will only be in that book, others may continue for two or more of the books (example: Di-woto, in *Across Horizons 2* and *3*, Skyra's other self in *Across Horizons 4*).

Planning a series:

Most of my experience (so far) is writing *Finite* series (which require more overall series planning anyway), so I will focus more on that.

Steps for planning a series (particularly for a *Finite* series):

1. Map out the series plot (just as you would for a single book). This does not have to be more than a bulleted-list a few pages long, but it needs to have a great beginning, a continuously-exciting middle, and an earth-shattering end. Remember, there must be tension and suspense throughout the entire series.
2. Divide that overall story arc into a reasonable number of books (usually three to eight). Remember, each book must contain a complete story, so divide the overall story arc accordingly.
3. Develop your characters. Get to know them well. Develop character profiles and character arcs (how they change). You want them to change, but you also need to be consistent! Your characters must make readers want to read ALL the books!
4. Develop your setting (world-building). Similar to developing your characters... *keep all the details at your fingertips*.
5. Start writing Book 1! Refer to the handout for *Time-Saving Tips For Writing a Novel*.

Marketing your series

- Many authors say to avoid long periods of time between releases (you could consider holding off on releasing the first one or two so you can *rapid release*).
- There is some truth to this. However... remember that you will be acquiring new readers all the time (if not, you aren't doing enough marketing). Many of your new readers will discover you *after* your series is complete, and they can read them all at once.

- **Series Marketing Essentials:**

- *Brand your covers*

They should all have a similar look and feel, using the same fonts, design, and color themes.

- *Brand your series title and book titles*

George R.R. Martin example: ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series: *A Game of Thrones, A Clash of Kings, A Storm of Swords, A Feast for Crows, A Dance with Dragons*

Stan C. Smith examples: ***Diffusion*** series: *Diffusion, Infusion, Profusion.*

Bridgers series: *The Lure of Infinity, The Cost of Survival, The Voice of Reason, The Mind of Many, The Bond of Absolution*
Across Horizons series: *Obsolete Theorem, Foregone Conflict, Hostile Emergence, Binary Existence, Genesis Sequence*

- *Brand your book descriptions and product pages*

Make your *taglines* similar.

- *Obsolete Theorem:* A time jump. A fight for survival. A bond between species.
- *Foregone Conflict:* A desperate team of travelers. A world at war. A new destiny.
- *Hostile Emergence:* A frenzied escape. A city of hope. An unforeseen threat.
- *Binary Existence:* A journey's end. A bold plan. A final conflict.

Make your *book descriptions* focus on the same elements.

The book description shows up on the book's product page. Readers almost always read the description before purchasing. Give each book description a similar structure.

Be sure to set up your *series page on Amazon* (and other retailers, if they allow it).

This is where readers can buy all the books in the series at once, and it also lists all the series books on all the book product pages.

- *Include a Call to Action (CTA) in the back matter of each book*

After the last page of each book, include a page that prompts the reader to get the next book in the series.

And don't forget to also include a CTA to leave a review and a CTA to join your email newsletter list!

- *Write a Reader Magnet*

A reader magnet is a short story or novella to promote your series. You give away ebook copies of this reader magnet in various types of promotions. This is BY FAR the best way to get new readers.

- *Promote the heck out of your first book in the series*
The wonderful thing about series is that you only have to promote the *first* book. If readers like the first book, they will read the second book. If they like the second book, they'll read the third book, and so on.

Conduct discounted (and especially *free*) *ebook promotions* of Book 1. Use email promotion services like Bookbub, Fussy Librarian, FreeBooksy, Ereader News Today, and others.

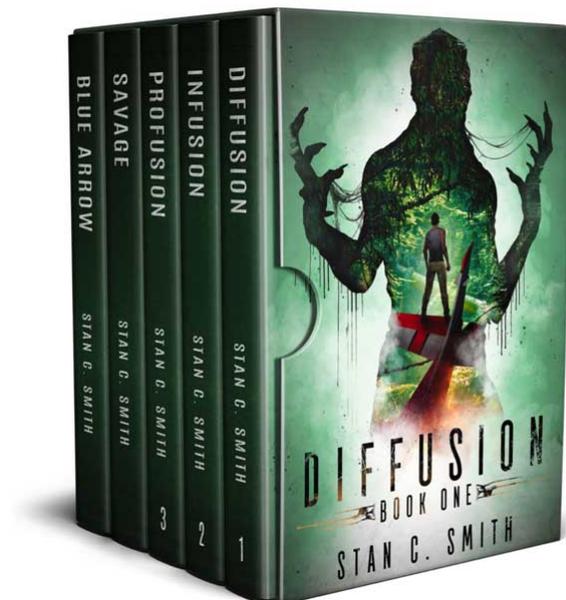
Create *ads* for Book 1 (Amazon Ads, Facebook Ads, Bookbub Ads). Consider the value of *read-through*, and how this affects advertising, such as *cost-per-click*. Read-through is the percentage of readers who continue through the series after reading Book 1. It is difficult to have profitable ads for a standalone book, it is easy to have profitable ads for the first book in a series!

Do *newsletter swaps* with other authors.

You can even make Book 1 *permanently free* (the ebook, of course).

IMPORTANT: The more people who read Book 1, the better, even if they get it for *free*.

- *Don't give up!*
If your first book is not successfully getting people to read the rest of your series, then revamp it (maybe with a second professional editor, or with a new cover, or with a new tagline and book description) and re-release it.
- *Create a series box set*
Readers love box sets (I'm talking about the ebook versions, of course), and box sets can be highly profitable.



A Final Point:

Writing a series (or even a single novel) is hard work. Write books that *you* would love to read. If you aren't passionate about it, you might never finish. Love what you do!