Stop Procrastinating and Write your Novel!
Time-Saving Tips from Start to Finish

Stan C. Smith

Everyone wants to write a novel, it seems. However, few people actually accomplish the task. Why? Because it's not as easy as it sounds. Fortunately, many authors—myself included—have discovered strategies that save time and result in a stronger story. Whether you're writing your first or your twentieth novel, some of these strategies can help you get that novel finished!

I've arranged these strategies into a logical order, from beginning to end. Let's get to it!

1. Understand who you are as a writer

It all starts with YOU. Remember, your books *are* you. Your "author platform" is just as much about you as it is about your books.

- *Identify your passion* (your genre and subgenre)
  What do you love to read? If you have a passion for time travel sci-fi, or for historical romance, that passion will push you forward in your writing and will shine through in your finished product.

- *Author marketing is about forming relationships with readers*. People buy books from authors they know, like, and **trust**. You might be able to sell *one* book to a reader, but you won't sell more than one unless they trust you as an author.

- *Answer these questions:*
  - Why are YOU the best person to write your book?
  - What compels YOU to write the stories you write?
  - What is unique about YOU as an author?

2. Understand your novel

Once you have identified the type of novel you are best suited to write, it's time to better understand that novel.

- *Identify and be able to explain your book's genre* (and subgenre, and sub-subgenre).
  Why? Readers are drawn to certain genres because they like the conventions of those genres. They expect to encounter those conventions when they read a book.

- *Answer these questions:*
  - What is your book's genre? What is your book's subgenre?
  - What are some of the genre conventions your readers expect?
  - What are some popular books that are comparable to your novel?

3. Understand your target readers

Understanding your novel helps you understand your targeted readers. Most genres have fans that can be *defined by existing data*. For example, I did a Google search for "demographics of science fiction readers" and quickly found more information than I needed. For example, *"science fiction readers account for about 20% of the US population, are wealthier than the average, are about 57 percent male and tend to reduce their reading volume between the ages of 45-65. Also—no surprise—SF readers are people who read a lot."*

- *Answer this question:*
  - What are some of the demographic characteristics of the readers of your genre?
- *Create a reader profile.*
  - Many authors like to create a detailed reader profile, as it helps them to visualize their ideal reader. This ideal reader is who you will keep in mind as you write your book, as you write your email newsletters, Facebook posts, tweets, Amazon book descriptions… everything!

4. Outline your novel

Authors are often divided into two categories: *Plotters* (who develop detailed outlines) and *Pantsers* (who write "by the seat of their pants"). Even pantsers can streamline the novel-writing process by starting with at least a brief outline of the overall story arc.

- *I HATE to do re-writes!* Editing a book is essential, but major re-writes are a colossal loss of valuable time. Re-writes are necessary only if you have an ineffective plot. So, avoid doing re-writes by outlining the overall structure of the story. That way, you know you have an effective story arc *before* you begin.
- *Identify a beginning, middle, and end that you know will satisfy readers.*
  - This can be three brief paragraphs:
    1. Describe a killer hook for the beginning.
    2. Describe some events in the middle that will continue the excitement and intrigue (without dragging the story down).
    3. Describe a stunning, memorable end.
- *Create a brief overall outline that will satisfy readers*
  Just a bulleted list of no more than a page or two. Keep it short! Why? Because its purpose is to give you a big-picture view of the overall story… so you know it will satisfy readers. No more than about 20 bullet points.
- *Practice this first.*
  Do a *one-page*, bullet-list outline of the last two *really good* novels you have read (focus on the main story elements). See the beginning, middle and end? Use those outlines as guides to write your own outline.
- *Take a closer look at your ending.*
  A novel's last chapter is just as important as its first chapter. Especially for a book in a series (this is what makes readers want to get the next book). A good memorable ending requires relevant details to be sprinkled in throughout the book—details that put together a logical breadcrumb trail leading to the culminating event. If you don't know what that amazing ending is going to be until you get there, then you will need to go back and do a major re-write to get it to mesh up with the story. Remember, *re-writes* are a colossal waste of time!
- *Most good ideas come to you as you are writing each chapter, not when writing the outline.*
  Why? Because you spend countless hours writing the chapters. All those hours of contemplation result in your best ideas. If you spent all those hours trying to come up with the creative details for the outline, you would waste too much time outlining instead of creating the book. Books get completed by writing them, not by outlining them.
- *Make your overall novel outline brief, but make chapter outlines more detailed.*
  Remember, the overall *novel outline* is to make sure you have an effective story arc. The *chapter outlines* are to provide you with the finer details that you don't need to worry about when you are writing the overall novel outline.

- *Do not write a chapter outline until you have finished writing the previous chapter.*
  Do not write the outline for Chapter 5 until you have finished writing Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4. Why? Because the best ideas come as you write each chapter. If you outline chapter 4 and chapter 5 at the same time, you would then have to make a new outline for chapter 5 after you finish writing chapter 4. Because your best ideas come as you write the chapters!

- *Now let's look at some examples.*
  Here's my overall novel outline for **Obsolete Theorem** (Book 1 in my Across Horizons series):

Obsolete Theorem

- I want the overall conflict to involve Skyra's tribe (Neanderthals), her sister, and the ancient humans who have migrated to Spain from Africa.

- The story starts with Skyra following the ancient humans, determined to save her sister.

- She either tries to enter their camp or is spotted by the ancient humans, and they chase her, which is how Skyra ends up dying.

- As she is dying, Ripple leaves a message for Lincoln to go back to the very specific location and very specific time, which is soon before Skyra is killed.

- Keep in mind there are encounters with creatures throughout the story.

- Lincoln and his team jump back in time, and they join Skyra in her mission to save her sister because Ripple tells Lincoln that Skyra and her sister will determine the fate of all humanity in the future.

- When they finally get her sister back, her sister is badly hurt and is emotionally and mentally broken.

- Toward the end of the book, they try to take Skyra and her sister back to Skyra's tribe. To the reader it looks like this is the resolution of the story.

- Then Skyra's tribe attacks them, perhaps because they spot the humans, or they spot Ripple.

- I want to show Skyra's tribe in the story, so they are with her tribe for a while, and then something happens (the entire tribe is attacked, or the tribe kills Veenah and decides to torture and attack Lincoln's group, for example).

- At this point there is no incentive for Skyra to stay with her tribe and they all narrowly escape back to the time machine (the T3).

- By this time, Lincoln is attached to Skyra and is willing to take her with them.

- Of course, throughout most of this, Ripple is secretly encouraging them to stay together, and is manipulative about it.

- The book ends with them jumping back to the future and finding things aren't what they had hoped. And this sets up Book 2. This is when Ripple reveals its plan. It says, "Of course this time period is unrecognizable! How could it be otherwise? It has been on a different timeline for 47,000 years! You have to go back and stay." "Why?" they ask. "Because my plan will not work if you don't go back and breed with Skyra." This is the closing chapter of Book 1 (Ripple's plan is revealed).

Here's a typical outline for a *single chapter*. Notice it is much more detailed.

Obsolete Theorem – Chapter 2

- Perhaps start chapter with Lincoln on a run. Make it clear that he likes to run but he does not run anywhere but on his own property. His longest course is only 3.1 mile, a 5K. He does not have his smart phone or any connection to his staff, because he likes to focus when he runs.
- When he gets back close to his corporate campus, Maddy is out next to the road waiting for him. Maddy stops him and says he has important visitors.
- He talks to Maddy a bit as he is going to his house (the lab). This should be humorous.
- There are people that have arrived to see him personally. There is a black SUV and a black van parked in front of the buildings. When he goes in he encounters government officials who are rather confrontational.
- Be sure to show Lincoln's abilities (his ability to predict what people are going to say and do… perhaps he does this to annoy the government people). Also show his cognitive/math skills.
- And show his distrust of older people. (Perhaps he asked Maddy if they are old).
- They show him videos on a tablet and photographs of findings in Spain. It is skeletal remains of a Neanderthal woman. Then they say the odd thing is that these remains were found because of a transmitted radio signal of some kind. People were drawn to the spot and found the remains.
- Then they ask him questions about his drones. He does not know why. They ask questions about his theorem, that no travel to the past could possibly impact the world because time travel creates an alternate universe. He points out that most physicists agree with him. In fact, that is why he was given permission to send his drones back in time to collect data.
- Then the big surprise comes. They show him photographs of an artifact that was found with the remains. It is a drone like his. He asks how they knew this was his. They reply coyly that his drone actually hosted Saturday Night Live and that everyone knows what his drones look like.
- They have a high-resolution 3D model of the Neanderthal woman's thigh bone. He can look at it on the tablet they have (actually, he has them send it to a large screen that he can manipulate in the air… describe the sensors that quick up his hand movements… with specific gloves… emphasize that he is showing off for these people, and they know it).
- This message is what convinces the government to allow him to go on this mission. Chapter ends with him interpreting the message, and it tells him that he must go back because the future of his world depends on it. He must save Skyra (although he doesn't know who she is).
- He points out that he has never been allowed to send people back before… they point out that this message changes everything.
- He points out that this is a one-way trip.
- Also have this come up (either here or in next Lincoln chapter)… The men are a little skeptical of allowing just Lincoln and his people do the mission (although they know it's a one-way trip, so they know few others will do it). And they ask him about his quirky habit of only hiring people who have significant mental or physical issues. This is a good way to reveal this.
- I like the idea of Ripple telling Lincoln to return to the past at a certain number of years and minutes and hours before a specific time on a specific date, such as midnight of January 1 on 2050. You can do this without giving away the specific year the book takes place. It also has to include exact coordinates for location!

5. Create your novel encyclopedia

It is impossible to overstate the importance of this! Your novel encyclopedia (or bible) contains all the relevant details about the world you have created, your characters, and more.

- *Your novel encyclopedia is a huge time saver.*
  Why? Because making mistakes in consistency requires re-writing, which is a waste of time.

- *This information needs to be at your fingertips.*
  These details need to be *easily* accessible *all* the time! If you forget the color of a character's hair, it should not take 60 seconds to look it up. It should take under 5 seconds! If you write your novel on a computer, your novel encyclopedia should be on the computer and well organized.
  - I write in *Scrivener*, which is designed for this. Everything is one click away.

- *You do not have to create all of this before you start writing.*
  - To save time, do only what you need to get started (and add to it as needed as you write new chapters)

- *What details should this include?*
  - Character profiles. Your characters make or a break a novel, so make them fascinating.
  - At first, focus on the main characters. Do not waste time on other characters until you are ready to write them into the story.
  - Include a photo of each character!
  - Create a list of characteristics you think will make the character stand out! The way they talk, their style of humor (or lack of humor), their background, etc. Remember, you can add to this as you write the novel.
  - World-building details. How does the tech work? The setting, time period, etc.
  - IMPORTANT—add more details as you write the novel (and put them in the right location). Do it religiously! You'll thank yourself later.

6. Write your novel

Don't give in to the temptation to do more research and planning. Stop procrastinating and write your novel! Remember, writing novels is how we learn how to write novels.

- *Set up a schedule.*
  When do you want to finish? 2 months, 4 months, 6 months? Calculate the number of words per day to reach your estimated book length (for example, 80,000 words). Make it *ambitious* but also *realistic*. I can average 1,000 words per day, so an 80,000-word novel = 80 days.

- *Write one chapter at a time, in order.*
  Why? Because re-writing is a waste of time! You cannot write chapter 5 until you have written chapter 4 (because all the best detail ideas come while writing the chapters).

- *Let your imagination loose!*
  Set a time of day that works best for your creativity level and your schedule, and do it every day! Choose a writing environment that stimulates your creativity. Create a music playlist for writing (if that helps). Make that time and location sacred!

- *Keep track of your words every day and set goals.*
  Give yourself rewards for achieving daily goals.

7. Edit your novel

Editing is just as important as writing! If you intend to sell your novels, *professional* editing is highly recommended. Set aside or start saving the $$ for it now.

- *Three basic types of editing.*
  1. **Developmental Editing** (sometimes called Substantive Editing)
     Overall structure and content, chapter by chapter. Story arc, plot, pacing, etc. Most expensive. I choose not to do this, but only because I have confidence in my overall story arcs (I outline my overall story).

  2. **Line Editing** (sometimes called Copy Editing)
     Editing for spelling, grammar, punctuation and syntax. Suggestions to sentence structure and word choice. For me, this is the best choice. But make sure this is what you're actually getting!

  3. **Proof Reading** (sometimes called Copy Editing)
     Grammar, spelling, punctuation, and typos. Least expensive. In my case, my Advance Reviewer Team serves this purpose.

My opinion: A good outline should make a structural edit unnecessary, and an advance reviewer (ARC) team should make a paid proofread unnecessary. A good line editor IS necessary.

For what it's worth, here is the sequence I currently use. I will modify this as I discover better strategies. This might be considered an unusual approach, but I write and edit one chapter at a time. A solid, reliable outline is necessary for this approach.

1. I write 1st draft of Chapter 1.
2. I read and revise Chapter 1 (2nd draft).
3. I print Chapter 1 and give it to Trish (my wife). She reads it and adds suggestions directly onto the printed pages and returns it. I go through it and apply her suggestions (3rd draft).
4. I print Chapter 1 again and give it to her. I read the chapter aloud from my computer as she looks at the printed pages. Together we make edits and I make the changes directly to the file on my computer (4th draft).
5. I send Chapter 1 to my professional editor (sometimes I will wait and send three or four chapters at once). She does a thorough ***LINE EDIT.***
6. I repeat steps 1-5 with Chapter 2, then I continue this until the last chapter is complete.
7. I can immediately begin applying the suggestions from my editor as soon as I've finished the last chapter because she has already sent me most of the earlier chapters. No need to wait (perhaps not all editors would be willing to do it this way, but I like this approach).
8. It takes at least ***50 hours*** to apply the suggested edits from my editor. Why? Because I insist that my editor make *suggestions*, not *changes*. She makes these suggestions as *Comments* in Word. As the author, it's important to me to choose which suggestions I want to follow, and then make the changes the way I want to make them (5th draft).
9. After I've applied the professional suggestions for all chapters, Trish will read the entire book and will find errors I made while applying the editing suggestions. I will then correct those errors, chapter by chapter (6th draft).
10. Now the book is ready for my ***Advance Reviewer Team***. I create a .MOBI file (for Kindle), an .EPUB file (for other ereaders), and a .PDF file. I upload these to Bookfunnel and create an ARC team book page. I send the link to the book page to my team (145 members). They usually have a week to ten days to read it and point out errors (you *must* give them a deadline). This is basically like having 145 proofreaders, and it doesn't cost anything (they get a free copy of the book). I apply their suggested edits (7th draft).
11. The book now has very few errors and is ready for publication.

8. Publish your novel
I am a proponent of indie publishing (sometimes called self publishing). Why? Well, that could be a topic for an entire hours-long presentation. If you're interested, here is a brief summary of why indie publishing is best for me.

A. *I want my books to be read now*
   - Indie publishing requires a few days from manuscript to market. No agent, no publisher.
   - Even print books can be available within 24 hours of uploading the book.

B. *I want to have creative control of my books*
   - I can fix errors in the book when readers find them.
   - I can replace book covers whenever I can afford a better one, or when the marketplace changes
   - I can retitle and rerelease my books to target an evolving market.
   - I can change the book's description on its Amazon product page to target an evolving market.

C. *Indie Publishing allows me to feel empowered*
   - Psychology research shows that a major contributor to happiness is *autonomy*—"the feeling that your life – its activities and habits – are under your control."
   - As the great indie author Joanna Penn says: "*Stop asking permission. You don't need it. Stop waiting to be chosen. Choose yourself.*"

D. *I want to earn some money*
   - With indie publishing, your ebook royalties are 70% of every sale (traditionally-published authors average 10%, with a range of 8% to 25%).
   - Plus, I don't want to give 15% of my earnings to an agent.
   - Indie authors are paid 60 days after the month of sales. Every month, without fail.

E. *I want to be able to change the prices of my books as needed*
   - I need to be able to change prices for various promotions and sales (a big part of marketing).

F. *I prefer to get paid in royalties rather than an advance*
   - Traditionally-published authors receive an advance (average of a few thousand dollars), and then royalties after that. However, many never earn their advance, so they get no royalties.

G. *I want to do my own marketing*
   - Authors have to do their own marketing regardless of how they publish. Marketing is *much easier* when you have control over your book's pricing, cover design, and product page description.

9. Most of all… enjoy planning and writing your novel!
Write what you love! Your passion will be contagious. Write for the joy of creative expression. Tell the stories you need to tell. Your books are you, and you are your books.