

# How to Write a Novel

## Part 2: Write the Draft

edX: UBCx – CW1.2x.

Instructors: Nancy Lee and Annabel Lyon

University of British Columbia Creative Writing Program

### ***Syllabus***

#### COURSE DESCRIPTION

While ideas and inspiration are often enough to ignite interest in writing a novel, writers can quickly lose confidence, especially when their best efforts have inadvertently produced flat characters, waning conflicts, tangled plots and weak dialogue. Reaching your goal of writing (and perhaps, publishing) a novel requires an understanding of fiction's deeper mechanics and a familiarity with the specific craft elements that will help translate your creativity and imagination into compelling paragraphs, scenes and chapters.

Through writing exercises aimed at developing new skills, concrete examples from published novels, discussion with fellow writers and opportunities to identify and strengthen weaknesses in their own projects, learners will broaden their knowledge of fiction craft as they explore creating memorable characters, the art of scene design, tactics for managing unwieldy plots and steps for writing layered and meaningful dialogue.

Whether you're beginning your novel draft or nearing the end, this course is a unique opportunity to learn the essentials of strong fiction writing from award-winning authors sharing their proven methods and approaches.

The course is recommended for professional and aspiring writers, writing groups, those participating in NaNoWriMo, teachers and anyone who has a novel in progress.

## WEEK BY WEEK BREAKDOWN

### Every Week

Learners will read writing examples, watch instructor videos and view interviews with published authors. Each week will include at least one assignment, a group discussion topic and instructor feedback in the form of video responses to questions related to that week's assignments during live office hours on Google Hangouts.

We will also be asking you to keep up with a weekly writing quota that you will set. While this won't be graded, we'll include weekly reminders along with your assignments each week.

### Week 1: The Odyssey (The Aesthetic Journey)

- First, we'll introduce students to the elements of the course, expectations, and what they can hope to accomplish. We'll discuss acceptable behaviour in feedback and discussion boards.
- Then we'll delve into "Getting Ready to Write", and discuss some ways you can structure and organize your writing time.
- For the majority of the week's lessons, we'll discuss the aesthetic journey: the manner in which your story will be told through language, imagery, voice, style and point of view. How a story is told can have a significant influence on whether or not a reader decides to continue reading past the first few pages.
  - *Point of view*. From whose perspective will the reader experience the story? Whose thoughts and feelings will the reader follow? Each point of view serves particular narrative purpose and each comes with its advantages and disadvantages.
  - *Type of prose*. Novelists who understand the function of each type of prose can choose the best approach for what they're planning to write, whether it's a tidy bundle of backstory, a lyrical passage that evokes a sense of place or high-energy banter that establishes character personalities.
  - *Voice*. Most people think of voice in terms of authors: Hemingway's voice, Woolf's voice, Atwood's voice--a strong, consistent stylistic quality that permeates these writers' works and makes the works uniquely theirs.

- Finally, we'll talk about beginnings. The first sentence, first paragraph, and first page of any story or novel are crucial in establishing reader expectations. We'll discuss how to 'pack a carry-on', of vital information, and look at some effective openings in fiction.

Assignment: In an exercise that plays with both the essential elements of an opening and the importance of voice and point of view, you will explore several different openings for your novel and assess the impact of each one.

## Week 2: War and Peace (Conflict and Tension)

A writer needs to ensure that their protagonist not only has depths and layers to explore, but also that they face constant and clear sources of tension and conflict. This week we'll look at several approaches that help writers reach these goals, including the aspects of an active character and how to troubleshoot an overly passive character, building dimensional characters who continue to surprise as the novel progresses, and crafting scenes that continually raise the emotional stakes of your story.

This week's topics include:

- *Active and Passive Characters.* What distinguishes an active character from a passive one? If you find your protagonist is too passive, how can you give him or her more agency?
- *Character Complexity and Conflict.* Your character is only as interesting as the obstacles they face. We'll discuss how we use internal, interpersonal and societal antagonisms to help build complex and fully realized characters as well as how to create multiple 'facets' for each person.
- *Tension in Scene.* To create tension in your story, you must bring something new and different to every scene. In this section, we'll discuss how to create tension, how to do it at differing scales and how to weave it into your story architecture
- *Backstory and Flashbacks.* How do we communicate essential character history to the reader? This section discusses the nuances of backstory and flashbacks in story, when they should be used, and how to avoid their pitfalls.

Assignment: You will be challenged to assess the dimensionality of your protagonist and tackle a scene that illustrates a key “turning point” that offers crucial insight into your main character.

### Week 3: We Need To Talk About Kevin (Dialogue)

Dialogue provides texture, variety and strong scenic pacing. Dialogue illustrates relationships, conflicts, power dynamics, heightens tension and betrays emotion. And, most importantly, dialogue always reveals more than the character intends. But how do we create dialogue that brings a character to life and strengthens the reader’s connection to the story? How do we balance the need to hear characters speak with the need to convey important story information?

This week’s topics include:

- What is the function of dialogue in fiction?
- How dialogue differs from everyday speech?
- What dialogue should never do.
- What are the hallmarks of great dialogue.
- How to work with subtext.
- Exploring the depths of your character: what is spoken, what is unspoken and what is unspeakable.
- How to format dialogue and work with dialogue tags.

Assignment: You will be asked to write a scene that dramatizes conflict between two characters through dialogue.

### WEEK 4: Shark Week! (Plot)

One of the most frequent complaints we hear from aspiring novelists is that they’ve hit the wall: at fifty, eighty, one hundred pages they lose momentum and just don’t know how to continue. So what are some techniques for getting past the wall, and forging ahead into the latter half of your novel?

To deal with these questions, we’ll be first be looking at two units from How to Write Your Novel: Part 1- the internal and external journey.

This week’s topics include:

- *The evolving outline.* What to do when you start to stray from your initial outline, or novel plan, and how plots evolve during the writing process.
- *Troubleshooting Structural Problems.* An exploration of problems which commonly arise during different parts of the novel.
- *Troubleshooting plot.* Different genres tend to pose different challenges for the writer. Here we'll examine five popular fiction genres (literary, speculative, crime, historical and romance), their plot challenges, and offer some tips and tricks for troubleshooting.
- *Endings.* This can be a writer's favourite or alternately, most dreaded part of a story, and this section will help you navigate through writing an effective ending.

**Assignment:** This week's assignment will bookend the first week's assignment. You'll write the end of your novel: the last chapter, last scene, last moments. Even if you haven't completed your draft yet, you will jump forward to those final pages. This assignment will provide tools of analysis and a checklist for a resonant, satisfying ending that will stay with your reader long after she's finished reading.

### Week 5: His Dark Materials (Research)

Fiction writers are sometimes tempted to skimp on research. We decide either to invent what we don't know or skim over the details, hoping that shorthand evocations of time or place will be enough. But even stories set in familiar times and environments benefit from research.

This week's topics are:

- *Why do research?* What can research bring to different types of fiction writing?
- *When to do research.* Should you learn your subject inside out before you attempt to fashion your story, or should you prioritize the narrative and go back to clean up your mistakes with research after the fact? Or is there a happy medium that will best suit all novelists?
- *What should you research?* What parts of your novel require research and what can you invent? How can you balance pragmatism, credibility and ethical considerations?

- *How do you best incorporate research?* Research is most often referred to as being like an iceberg: most of what you know will not make it into the novel, but it will inform the novel. But how do you incorporate the essential information into your novel without harming the narrative? In this section, we'll look into something called 'The Ignorant Character'.
- *Case studies.* We'll look at the specific genre challenges in researching, specifically: Historical Fiction, Speculative Fiction, Crime Fiction, and Socio-Political fiction.
- *The ethics of research.* What ethical considerations should you keep in mind when you do research? How do you treat the events and people of the past, other cultures and points of view?
- *Writing about yourself and your family.* How do you handle the complex and thorny issues that arise when you write about family events, family members, or even when you're simply perceived to be doing so?

Assignment: you will apply this week's work in an exercise which challenges you to evaluate several different ways of incorporating research.

#### Week 6: One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (Mind Over Manuscript)

Writing a novel is hard work, and it's a long process, with many bumps and detours along the way. Many half-finished novels are testament to this. Creating a novel is not unlike running a marathon, and this week we'll talk about techniques and tips to make sure you finish the journey.

This week's topics include:

- *Blind Alleys.* Unfortunately, not all of what you initially write will be used in your final draft--you'll need to throw some things away. This section will help you identify blind alleys and back out of them.
- *Procrastination and Hitting the Wall.* Published authors will be talking about their own experiences with procrastination, and this unit will be going over ways to combat these mental blocks
- *Grappling with Theme.* We'll discuss this slippery creature and provide a set of questions you can use to interrogate the way theme is working in your manuscript.
- *Do's and don'ts.* To end of the course, Nancy and Annabel will be going over a comprehensive list of Do's and Don'ts when writing your novel.

Assignment: This week's assignment will be to complete the Tool of Analysis. This will help you identify your weaknesses and ultimately provide the solutions to overcome them.