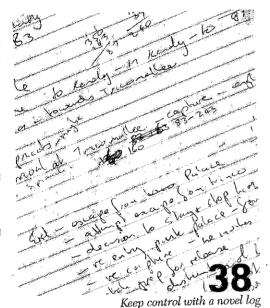


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Writer

SEPTEMBER 2005

VOLUME 118 *NUMBER 9

The essential resource for writers since 1887

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This month at writermag.com

- Has e-mail taken the place of letter writing? We posed this question in a recent newsletter; readers respond in Web Only.
- Starting in late August: Writer subscribers will have access to our online database of 2,500+ markets in Market Listings.

Some books in this issue were provided by Harry W. Schwartz Bookshops, Milwaukee: www.schwartzbooks.com

Cover photo of Jacquelyn Mitchard by Patricia Kelly

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How to keep

tabs on your novel's progress

Use a novel log to rein in aimless plot threads and characters

By Jillian Abbott

ARTHUR C. CLARKE once told me that writing a novel is a journey into the unknown. He might have added that the journey is long, solitary and poorly marked, leaving travelers in constant danger of losing their way.

It is possible, however, to demystify the process. Using a variety of simple techniques, authors can wrangle an unruly

first draft into a viable and, it is hoped, saleable work.

I've found that creating a novel logbook is a great way to give direction to your writing. Requiring nothing more than a standard notebook and pen, your log can be the blueprint containing everything from a record of what's been written and why to notes on characters, plotting and setting.

Start by making a contract with yourself. Agree to write a certain number of words each day. Next, designate a notebook exclusively for the novel you're working on. Then, before each writing session, record your goal for that day's writing.

From day one of my last novel,

I made extensive entries in the log, sketching out the characters, settings and plot points. Although my day's writing was done on computer, my notes in the logbook read: Today I'll write 500 words of chapter 3 where Morgan and Jay argue about the mission. Then I jotted down additional notations: Morgan is outraged by Jay's arrogance. By writing

> Pages from Jillian Abbott's novel log show extensive notes on plot changes and characters.

down just a few details, it

was possible to follow the

story and identity problems without rereading the entire manuscript. I always dated each entry so I could easily identify my most recent thoughts.

After two weeks, I was hooked. Use your logbook to keep track of the following key elements:

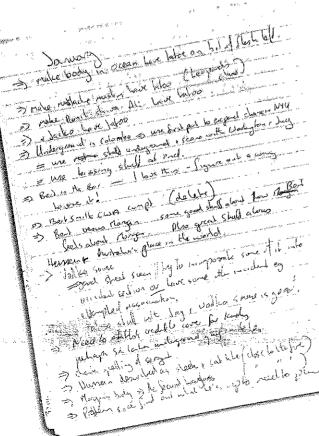
1. Structure

When I began work on my novel, which is set in Sri Lanka, I only had a vague idea of the whole, so I kept lists of proposed and existing chapters. To remind me what they were about, rather than numbering the chapters I gave them names.

The first list contained nine chapters, including The Party, Wendell Returns, Underground in Colombo, Gun Control and Why Kandy? Just reading through the lists allowed me to alter the structure, either by combining chapters or changing their order. By doing this throughout the process, the whole book began to emerge. In the final version, The Party and Underground in Colombo are combined at the beginning, and Why Kandy? comes well before Wendell Returns and Gun Control.

2. Character

I had wanted to create a female James Bond, but despite wanting to



keep the fun of Bond, I realized I couldn't spend a year with his exact female equivalent.

A page in my logbook is headed: Words to describe James Bond. I circled the words that described Morgan, my protagonist. The list included:

(Justy) sexist (sophisticated) cold (fighter) promiscuous ruthless single (heroic) (irresistible)

I also had written the word temptation followed by a question mark. I wanted Morgan to feel sexual temptation, but unlike Bond, I wanted her to resist.

I wrote more notes on Bond then and now. Bond is the product of the 1960s sexual revolution. I wanted a new character. What if Morgan were married? From Elizabeth Bennet to Bridget Iones. women's stories end when they get their man. Could I get away with a married female Bond?

3. Point of view

Traditionally, thrillers are written using multiple points of view. You can create suspense and menace, for example, by presenting the villain's point of view.

Morgan, a strong character with a sassy inner voice, encouraged me to explore first person. But this wasn't a literary novel, and by reading my list of chapters I could see that first person placed too many limitations on the plot. In addition to naming the chapters, I had listed the cast, setting and goal for each. Since Morgan was absent from one of the chapters, the first-person point of view was unworkable.

My log revealed another prob-

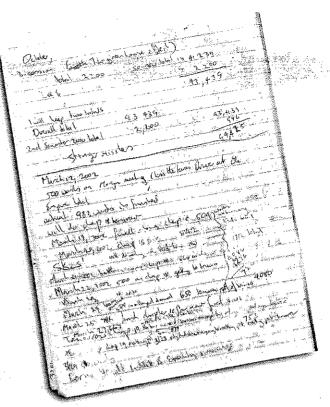
lem. In Chapter 1, a first-person description of the bad guy bogged down. I switched to third person limited. Here are my notes:

> March 2: Morgan describing Jacko, 1st Person

What is it with bald guys and the comb-over? I mean, does Jacko think I'm going to describe him to someone as the guy with hair? Bald can be sexy, but the dozen strands of oily hair?

May 26th: More notes on 1st Person

Reads like a stand-up routine. Too much emphasis on Jacko's hair. Bogged down. It's a thriller, remember,



Workout

ONE: Start your logbook

Decide how many words you'll write each day for the next two weeks. Be realistic: at least 50 words, no more than 2,000 (recommended: 500-1,000).

Designate a notebook exclusively for your current novel. At the beginning of each writing session, jot down the date and: Today I will write 500 words of the scene where ... Write the 500 words (elsewhere). Just let words come; don't censor or edit. This is a first draft.

Once your goal is reached, you can keep writing but always stop in the thick of it, when you still have more to say (provides motivation to return to the work next day).

End the session back in your notebook with: Tomorrow I will write 500 words in which ... Add any additional ideas or questions that occur to you.

At the end of two weeks, tally your words. Read over the jottings. Are the characters coming alive? Are you developing a vision of your novel? Do scenes flow from one to the next?

TWO: Create a character log

Head a page in your notebook with a character's name. List words to describe him/her.

Print and read a chapter. Do you want to add words? Remove words? Does the character's backstory fit with these words?

–Jillian Abbott

Requiring nothing more than a standard notebook and pen, your novel log can be the blueprint containing everything from a record of what's been written and why, to notes on characters, plotting and setting.

June 28: Jacko, 3rd Person limited

Morgan Blake leaned against a marble pillar watching her host, Jacko Snider. He and his dozen strands of oily hair were deep in conversation with a large, mustachiced Muslim.

4. Tracking

Make notes in your logbook with each read-through of the manuscript. A small change in character or plot will send a ripple through the whole work.

When an unexpected event or action occurs late in a novel, it is important that you have placed

Resources

- . The Elements of Style by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White. This classic sets ground rules for punctuation, grammar and form.
- Structuring Your Novel: From Basic Idea to Finished Manuscript by Robert C. Meredith and John D. Fitzgerald
- Story by Robert McKee
- Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing by David Morrell
- . "Organizing Your Writing" by Michelle Jean Hoppe, Literary Liaisons www.literary-liaisons.com/article 049.html

hints and clues earlier in the narrative so that the event grows out of the story organically. For example, I wanted Morgan to be the heroine in a shootout. I gave her

four bullets and three opponents, all of whom must be disabled so that she and Jay can escape the clutches of my villain.

First, I noted that Jay can teach her to shoot. I wrote a draft of a shooting lesson, read it over and concluded Morgan is too passive. Then I wrote, She can teach him to shoot. I tried that, but Jay just wasn't the kind of guy to take a shooting lesson from a woman. Besides, he was a professional spy and would-be expert marksman. Finally, I wrote, Don't tell Jay she's a marksman. When I wrote this, I knew it was right. There was ample opportunity to clue the reader in early, and Jay was the kind of guy who'd assume Morgan needed a lesson. I had my perfect chapter.

I also realized that Morgan's marriage would change things, I read through my log, noting scenes that would have to be modified. I titled a page in my log: The effects of marriage. The scene described above, for example, crackled with sexual tension. On rereading it, however, I wanted to

keep the chemistry. I wrote in my notebook, Should a married woman still flirt? Answer: You bet. But I didn't want Morgan to be an exact James Bond. How would a sophisticated, married woman react to physical contact with a man she was clearly attracted to? I decided she'd be excited, frightened, flustered for a moment and then fight to regain control.

A logbook gives you a complete record of the writing of each draft of your novel. I found this record to be the single most valuable tool in my novel writing kit. I hope you'll find it as useful. #

Iillian Abbott

Freelance writer Jillian Abbott of Bayside. N.Y., is an essayist, novelist and screenwriter whose work has been published in the U.S., Britain and Australia. Abbott recently completed a thriller titled The Leopard's Claw.

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For other examples of how writers track their novels, go to The Writer Web site and click on Online Extra.