



How I Write

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I AM A PANTSER. When I begin to write I don't think about grand words like 'process' and 'structure'. I didn't even used to know about the Hero's Journey or Robert McKee's 'Story' or John Yorke's 'Ten Questions'. All I knew was that I had a burning desire to write. The first books poured out of me — probably because they were stories that I had been sitting with for a while without knowing it, and I was excited to spill them out on to the page. This worked wonderfully for the first couple of years. I sat and I wrote and I found my way through the plotting process without a map and it was a huge, joyful adventure.

It was when I was asked to write more books in a series that the doubts began to creep in and I started to worry that I might need a map after all. How exactly had I managed to do it last time? Could I do it again? Should I plan? HOW SHOULD I PLAN?

I became fixated on the methodology of others. I scrutinised all the *How To* books, underlining and circling and leaving excited exclamation marks along the margins. I photocopied complicated diagrams that showed me the path I should follow. I went to bed at night with this new and revelatory vocabulary bouncing around my brain.

You must find your mid-point reversal! You must know your character's motivations! You must map out the climax of the story so you know the goal you are moving your characters towards!



I became mildly obsessed – okay, not so mildly – with a friend who described herself as an ‘arch-planner’. She talked about her folders of research and her raft of identical ring-bound notebooks, a clean one for each new book, each page neatly marked with bullet points charting every scene so that she could sit down in the morning and know which pre-planned chapter she was going to write.

This was it, I decided! This was the way to do it. All I needed to do was to buy an equally impressive collection of folders and notebooks and I soon would be compiling lists of chapter headings and working out my key scenes and plotting out my whole novel before I had even written a sentence of the actual manuscript. When I was really struggling with one particular chapter book, I tried sending chapter plans off to my editor, promising the outline of the story to try and keep myself on track.

It was hopeless. I felt trapped. I would sit down to write and find I couldn’t. I couldn’t write that chapter about the girl’s mother falling in love with the man next door because I didn’t know the man next door yet. I couldn’t write the funny scene in the cafeteria with the bullies and the custard because I didn’t know the bullies, couldn’t taste the custard, couldn’t visualise the cafeteria.

And then, just when I was considering jacking the whole thing in, telling myself that those early books were flukes, that I only had a couple of stories in me and that I should probably pay back that advance for this series and admit I couldn’t do it... I started to tune in to a conversation that another kind of writer was having.

I went to talks at festivals and book launches and heard writers confess with a light-hearted laugh that ‘I never plan — I just start writing!’ I chatted with a writer friend about writing the scenes we were excited about and just plunging in, not knowing where the stories would lead us — *not* having a map and just going along, keeping an eye out for interesting things along the way.



I went back to my desk afterwards feeling a mixture of relief and excitement. It was OK to be a pantsers! Some of the best writers were pantsers too! In fact, when I looked honestly at what I had had published so far, my best books were the result of pantsing. For example, there was the novel which had started with a scene I had sent to my agent, not knowing who the protagonists were, which had excited her enough to say, ‘Write this book!’

Maybe it was a waste of time, comparing myself to the planners and the plotters and worrying myself in knots over the fact that I don’t write to a road map. I don’t think so, though. I discovered what works for me by trying out other methods and I have come to accept that the days of ‘noodling’ at a scene which might very well get deleted are not actually a waste of time, rather they are part of the process of writing a first draft. In the same way as I take my dog for walks, trying out new paths that I come across and not being entirely confident that they will lead me back to the main road, I take my pencil and my notebook – or my laptop – and I start out on my story, stopping to pick the metaphorical blackberries and sniff the sea breeze along the way.

And now that I teach others how to write, when my students ask me, ‘But how do you *do* it?’ I can say, hand on heart, you have to find out what works for you — you might find it useful to follow the Hero’s Journey or you might enjoy throwing out the rule books and daydreaming and scribbling and seeing where the words take you instead. It doesn’t really matter. In the end, how you write is up to you.