



## How I Write

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I'M A PLANNER. I plan a book to within an inch of its life. It's just the way my brain works. I've talked to many other writers about this and it seems there are three main types: planners or pantsers or a mixture of both. If you've not heard of it, the term 'pantser' is a writer who flies by the seat of their pants, i.e. they don't plan in advance and let it all unfurl as they go along. I've heard quite a few writer friends say they start off with a vague outline of the characters and a few key scenes in mind, then start writing. They don't know where the plot will go; they leave that up to the characters to decide. The internal logic of the plot will work itself out over time. Some writer friends have said they are a bit of both, that they do this 'pantser' method for the first 30k words or so, then they take a step back, look at what they've done so far and where the novel is going, then plan out the rest. I'm the other option: the full-on planner. As I say, it's the way my mind works, the only way I can think of a novel, as a piece of architecture, which needs planning, brick by brick. So, how do I start? I'll have a theme in mind, maybe one or two characters, usually a setting and some elements or scenes in mind. Since I am an historical novelist, I start then with the research. This helps to give more shape to the novel, giving me ideas for things the characters might do in those settings. Then I write a detailed synopsis and when I say detailed I mean it could be several thousand words. I then take a really large sheet of paper – usually A1 size – and I start mapping out the events of the synopsis into likely chapters. Each scene needs a chapter and tends to take me around 3–5k words to express, which means in a maximum 100k-word novel, that'll be around about twenty chapters. So, I have a chapter plan, which I type



up, copying and pasting paragraphs from the synopsis into each chapter heading, using one page per chapter. I print it out, staple it and have it on my desk throughout the entire first draft. So yes, I am a planner. But what I've not mentioned yet is that a kind of magic happens in the writing itself, whereby plots I've planned don't work, or need modifying, or veer off in unexpected directions, not to mention the pesky characters. They have an annoying habit of being autonomous and going off and falling in love with the wrong person and so forth. But I've learnt over the years that this is my subconscious speaking and I must listen. If I get a plot line that won't work or a character wants to break out of the plan, I usually listen as they're usually right. The perfect way to write a novel for me is to plan it out rigidly, but never forget to be flexible as a willow tree in the wind when it comes to listening to my subconscious. It almost *always* knows best.