

Outline and Worksheet for Your Writing Project

Use These Steps to Stimulate, Engage, Discover, Listen, Develop, and Capture Your Words

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The goal is to provide a working structure, a concrete outline of ingredients to use while being enveloped by your fluid, and often fussy, creative process of writing. Sometimes we go into this writing relationship quickly, ready to bang the ideas out, only to wake up one morning, completely dry and wondering what happened to the potent juicy rush that was driving the show. Other times, a slow disclosure of themes and ideas tempts and entices us, as only a petulant muse can do: she wants our attention, yet the flirting is painfully slow, ambiguous, messy. In either situation, even though the commitment to develop our writing can be present, the wrestling with how to move forward can exhaust the brain, the heart, the soul.



Having a structural tool, a recipe of elements, a check- list of compositional must-haves can break blockages, mind-fog, and frustration. It can infuse and wet even the driest pocket of the emotional glue needed to preserver into clarity and full expression. Even if the writing flow is a springtime waterfall, the writer can be taken up in such ecstasy of the moment, a blindness is present to the necessary rules of the writing road. If these rules of writing are ignored, the writer faces a hard reality at the end, when the editor politely sighs out something along the lines of “This is a great beginning, and there’s a few things we now need to work on.”

Hence, the following outline and worksheet is provided as a guide, a friend, a stimulant to know your writing, well.

It is a promise, if you include all of the listed elements and ingredients found in this guide, and make them present in your writing, then you will find yourself fully engaged, as if listening and downloading your story to the page, as opposed to chiseling out letter by letter of each sentence, hoping what you produce is really what wants to be heard. Have fun, be brilliant!

The Ingredients and Elements: The following ideas are not to be followed in any set sequence. Move through them individually, on your own time, in your way. They are organized though, accordingly for specific writing sections, such as the beginning process of clarifying your themes, main ideas, and goals; or for developing the architecture of your story; or for editing continuity and full development. Each idea has been fully tested in a writing composition class, a writing seminar, a creative process course, and has been incorporated in thousands of academic papers, personal and professional articles, theses, dissertations, scripts, business plans, novels, narratives, non-fiction, love letters, poems, commercials, lyrics, blogs, e-zines, webpages, journals, and wills.

This is not a step-by-step-this-is-how-to-write guide. Instead, this is a process on how to know yourself, your writing, your evolving writing project. I often tell students I know how they live their lives by how they write their papers. If their work is vague, non-specific, non-descriptive, shallow, and un-focused, chances are their life can be described in a similar fashion, as well. The more thought you put into your writing, the more thought you are able to give to yourself. It also works in reverse: the more depth and insight you develop of yourself, the more depth and insight your writing will exhibit. You cannot write profound truths if you live shying away from the tender under belly of feelings, emotions, behaviors, fears, and desires. At best, you will be clever, which is the lazy writer's way of avoiding the risk of being brilliant.

You might need assistance to incorporate certain ideas, such as proper tenses, pronoun misuse, use of commas, independent versus dependent clauses. Reach out to an online writing guide, or to a writing coach, or to a tutoring center at the local college. Owl Purdue has a great online writing center, and it is free. You might also want to have another writer or artist as a peer support. Look for someone who is equally in love with his or her project, as you are with yours. The support can provide energy that validates your work, and can hold you accountable to make headway, as you continue toward completion.

Start Here:

Generate and Develop Ideas. Make a mind map or a web, draw circles of ideas and link them together in ways that make sense for you. Write down everything, and anything you believe is of interest to you. You know you will not write about everything mentioned, yet the culling process is just as important in what you eliminate, as it is in what you select.

Visualize: See yourself reading the final work. See the themes, ideas, reasons, specific examples you will use to convey your story. Be inside the story. Watch yourself in the work.

Develop: Take each idea and write on a clean sheet of paper everything you want to say about it. This will grow, and you will edit your words. You can have pages and pages on your ideas. Yet, keeping each idea separate, prior to weaving it into the larger framework of your story, will let you be completely comfortable in truly

knowing and understanding each specific idea in your story.

Organize: How are you going to organize the ideas? What comes first? What is the most important?

Sometimes using old fashion index cards, each with an aspect of your story written on them, can help 'see' the path of your story. Practice, and try a few different ways to organize the pathway. Give up the notion you have to know ahead of time what is going to happen, and how. Play with the options, and let the story elements show you the best way.

Storyboard: Sketch out your path of development: what happens, when does it happen, what is on either side of the main idea; show the examples of your main idea; show the examples of the details; actually, physically place the scenes next to each other to see if it works. This means you are engaged with the pacing out of the story. While you may believe you know the storyline, the storyboard will show you better options, early editing possibilities, and will help you identify weaknesses early on. Many writers rebel against creating a storyboard: 'it's too much work'; 'I'm writing a narrative. I don't need a storyboard'; 'I don't know what or how I'm going to tell me story.' Yes, a storyboard takes time; it is also flexible and will required editing. While it takes time to create, it also saves time, in the long run. It will create clarity. It will build confidence. It can be fun, as well. Make a storyboard. It is your roadmap, your birth certificate for the project. If you have never created one, try it on by first making a list of what you are

going to do today. Then, one by one, create a visual scene with either a sketch, a cut-out, a swath of color that represents the feeling of the pending activity, or an image from the internet, and show yourself what your day is going to look like.

Develop Your Written Voice: Who are you in your writing? How are you speaking to the reader? How do you want to speak to your reader?

What is Your Point of View: Explain yourself to yourself. Write two – three paragraphs explaining your point of view to yourself.

Establish Your Tone: How would your reader describe you by your written tone? Match your tone with your topic.

What is the Atmosphere in Your Story: Describe the atmosphere you believe will best support and convey your message and meaning.

What is the Attitude in Your Writing: How do you develop attitude in writing?

Word Choice: Practice using descriptive language, which is not flowery, verbose useless words, but is instead a specific, unique, and original art in plucking exact words for clarity and precision.

Tenses: Decide on your main tense, and practice writing examples of your main ideas in different tenses to show yourself if you've made the correct choice. As you develop the writing, be vigilant in checking your tenses.

Sentence Structure: Learn sentence structure for comma splices, fragments; dependent and independent clauses; use of modifiers, dangling and misplaced modifiers; prepositions; subject-verb agreement; conjunctions; adjectives and adverbs; parallel structure; illogical shifts.

Use of Commas: "I ate Grandmother." Kind of boggles the mind, until the small cove of understanding, the comma, is employed to bring meaning into the sentence: "I ate, Grandmother." We instantly moved from a cannibalistic meal, into an act of kindness, by letting Grandmother rest in her chair, instead of getting up to fix a last minute dinner. Make commas your best friend.

Pronoun Misuse: How many pronouns live in each of your sentences? What do they represent? Who are they? Be specific.

That: Edit out all "that"'s. Every. One. Of. Them. There are very few situations where the word 'that' should/can be used. The more you use the word 'that', the more vague you make your writing. Don't be vague.

Specifics, Examples, Details: The more you show, the more your reader will know and understand. The more your reader knows, the deeper they will connect to your words. The deeper your reader will connect to your words, the more valuable of a writer you will become to your reader. The more valuable of a writer you become to your reader, the more successful of a writer you will be to yourself.

Use Your Dreams; Keep a dream log of the images, the feelings, the little pieces of flotsam from the night. Let those childhood thoughts be in the light. Don't judge them, but instead invite them in and host them as your guests. In Jungian work, this is called Active Imagination, and is extremely valuable in developing your creative process, whether you are a writer, a painter, photographer . . . any artist, seeker, scientist can benefit from dream tending and active imagination. Let these insights infuse your story. Some of my writers tell me their stories have dreams, and part of the process of craft is listening to the story tell the dream.

Continuity: Storyboard your continuity.

Pacing: Think about each part of your story, and now decide how you will pace it. Are you going to write with or against the idea? In other words, if you are telling a fast paced, rapid adventure, full of heroics, and adrenaline, are you going to use short sentences with words that support instant awareness, or is there merit in slowing down the read with clauses, and phrases, and details to enrich and stack the adventure with deeper meaning, as found in a myth, such as the Odyssey? On your storyboard, make notations on the pacing, and see if you play around with pacing, what happens with the characters, the lessons, the overall meaning?

Landscape: Don't forget to integrate the landscape, Nature, weather, seasons, temperature, flora and fauna. These elements are characters in a story, too. Often, the landscape is the

main character, and provides continuity throughout time, and links your story to the larger, longer, deeper thread of eternity. Scary stuff, but true. We love our writers who love landscape: history, religion, politics, lovers, epochs of science, survival, art, emancipation all are contextualized in landscape. Use it.

Different Audiences: Know who will read your work, and why. If you write a narrative book about your journey of self-discovery as a woman, and from this success you are asked to write an article for a magazine read by both women and men, change it up from your original narrative message, into an updated expression for the other multiple genders. Use the new opportunity to speak to a larger audience.

Poetry: Even if you don't like poetry, read it. Even if you don't write poetry, write it. Doing so is cross-training in writing. You will be surprised to see how your poetry will find its way into your final draft. Think of your poetry as part of your unconscious flirting with your ego-way of expression.

Journaling: Please keep a journal. There are numerous books on the value of journaling. Start journaling. If you forget a day or a week, just return to it. Make journaling part of your daily practice, just like eating, sleeping, bathrooming, walking, talking. Dream tending and Journaling are two of the most important foundations of writing.

Physical exercise: Include your physical body in the body of your writing is highly recommended. Again,

you live your writing by the way you live your life. If your body is sluggish, there will be sluggishness somewhere in your writing. I'm not saying you have to be fit and lean to be a great writer. But, if your body sweats and stretches, and your muscles reach beyond their normal state of being, your body will assist in creating neurotransmitters of serotonin and dopamine. These two neurotransmitters are the designated drivers of creativity. There is a huge body of literature demonstrating the linkage between creativity, the need for serotonin and dopamine while being creative, and how exercising generates, stimulates, and creates these two brain chemicals. Hence, physical exercise helps to be creative.

Meditation: Additional studies demonstrate the activity of meditation also stimulates dopamine. If you resist daily exercise, then at least sit in meditation for a specific, intentional set of time. Hopefully, you will do both exercise and meditation. Visualization exercises for relaxation, stress-reduction, anger management, and mindful breath-work are ways to begin meditation. Tara Brach has hundreds of free Youtube videos on learning how to meditate and how to practice mindfulness.

Peer Review: It was mentioned earlier the value of being seen, both you and your work. Besides keeping you honest and on schedule, there is also this sensation of satisfaction and self-worth, which will grow once the writing's strengths and weaknesses are discussed outside of your head.

Editing: There are a few writers who hold the belief they can, and have to produce a final work in a first, or perhaps a second draft version. Then, there are the rest of us who know we may get lucky around the six or seventh draft version. I suggest you hold off declaring which type of writer you are, until you complete the next book. Until the book (or thesis, or script) is completed, please give yourself the grace, the space, the time, and the patience to allow for the work to be delivered as it needs to be delivered. This is not permission to slack off, to procrastinate, or to doubt your ability to write. This is the call to be real about the time needed for the writing process . . . all of it. If you are currently in a writing project, and you are not writing due to whatever the reason, then you have clamped down, and defined yourself as a writer that has to write the perfect first draft. Stop it now. The tension and the stress will erode your energy. One of my professors, Robert Romanyishyn, at Pacifica Graduate Institute, once recognized sheer terror on my face, while discussing my dissertation. He very quietly looked into my eyes and said, "You don't choose the work, the work chooses you." His words gave me great relief. I knew I was off the hook: I was not in charge; instead, I was *in service*. I was the steward of the work, and I needed to tend to it as best I could. If the work had made a mistake in selecting me to represent it, then I knew it would leave, and I would be free to be a steward for another project. If the work made the perfect selection in picking me, then I knew my belief in myself was enough to get the project done, and I no longer had cause to worry, or to experience

sheer terror over, or from, the writing process. I was free.

Writing is still hard, difficult, taxing. Yet, these terms are generated from, and by, the rest of my non-writing life: if I just stay with tending to the story, to listening to what wants to be heard, then the writing process is actually enjoyable, even stimulating. The devotion to the story should be enough, yet there is a tendency to want to complicate it with the rest of life. When it is difficult to hear the story, we are letting the rest of life occupy the creative space.

With the intention to be in service to the writing process, I created this outline and worksheet. All of these ideas, elements and ingredients are used in my writing classes, seminars, and workshops. May you be in love with your writing, regardless of the topic. May you be the best steward possible, and as always, have fun, be brilliant!

Bio: Brenda Littleton is a writer, editor, professor, therapist, and writing coach based in California. She has helped thousands of writing students, authors, first-time writers and seasoned entertainment professionals, with creative clarity, voice, structure, development, continuity, creativity, and originality in their written work. Her experience spans being a university coordinator of graduate writing, to writing hack for television, to corporate deva in product development, to lobbying maven with EPA, Cal-OSHA, and Department of Justice, to ghost writing and providing midwife services for birthing *that* book. Her forte is creative non-fiction, narrative, research expose and documentary projects. Coaching and editing services available.

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