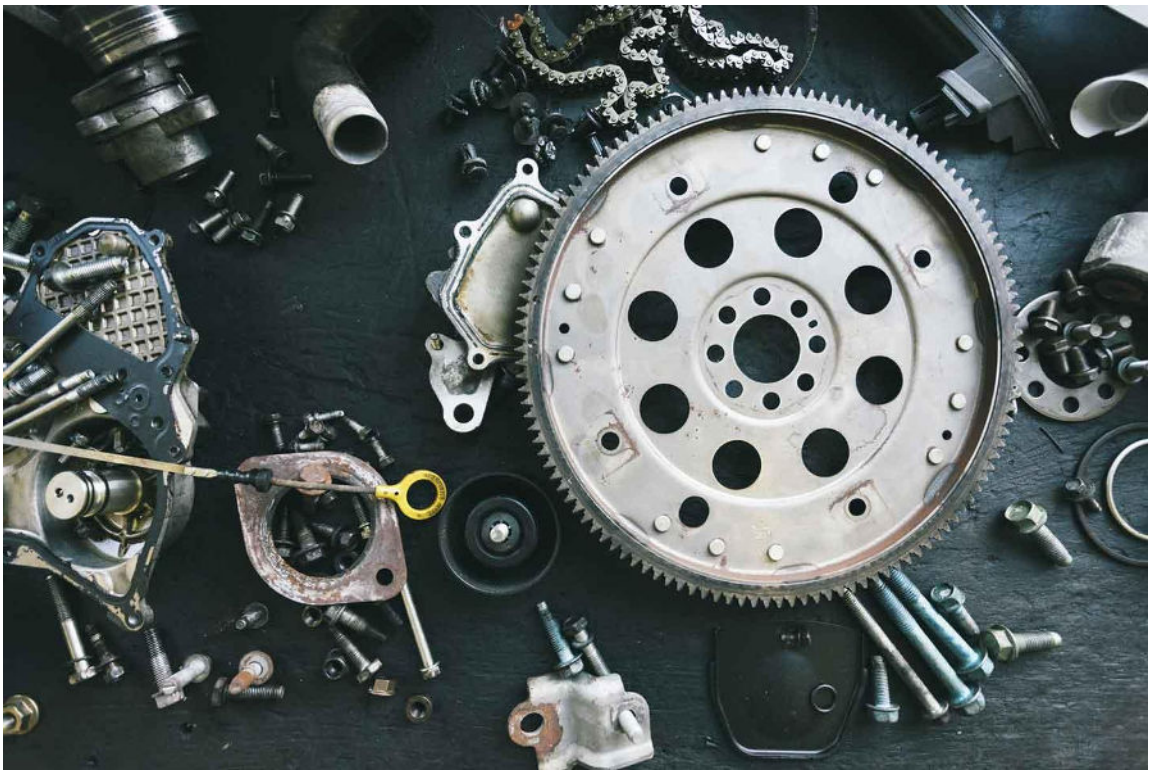
A WORKING METHOD FOR THE NOVELIST

Based on Phyllis Whitney's
Notebook Method of Planning and Writing a Novel



by

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The Notebook Method

I first heard about Phyllis Whitney's organized writing method at a writers' conference when an author talked about it at a round-table discussion. I was intrigued enough to hunt down a copy of Whitney's *Guide to Fiction Writing* and found it to be an invaluable tool for my creative process. Two chapters of the book are devoted to her method she invented when her college students kept pressing her to explain the best organizing and working method of all the ones she knew, so she invented one (typical writer!).

All beginning writers collect bits and scraps of story ideas, setting, or character profiles; usually these go into online files or manilla folders or even a shoe box. However, it is essential to collect those bits and scraps of thoughts on your story and organize them in some way that will allow you to access them repeatedly and conveniently. You must avoid having the protagonist's hair color change or height alter by a few inches. You must keep setting details consistent. You must make all background events consistent. These issues are especially important when writing historical fiction (as I do) because much of the storyline takes place around actual historical events and/or people. As your manuscript lengthens, it can become too time consuming to search through notes and online files for the name of your protagonist's uncle or the street where she lived as a child.

You must finish the same story you start and, to do this, you must have a clear picture of where you are going. Whitney's Notebook Method is an excellent way to create that picture.

The Notebook Method involves three phases of writing: the planning stage, writing stage, and revision stage. As you assemble your notebook and fill out the various sections in it, you are in the planning stage. The order of the sections can be re-arranged to suit any writer's style; they do not need to be completed in any particular order.

Some of the sections of your notebook, such as character profiles, should be completed or close to completions before you begin to work on the writing stage. Certain sections, such as your progress calendar, will be filled out as your manuscript is written. You will recognize some of these sections as element of fiction writing that you have studied, though some sections may be unfamiliar to you.

The forms in the back of this booklet are intended to be copied and placed in your notebook.

So let's get started!

How to Build Your Notebook

Materials

1. A loose-leaf binder, at least 1 ½ inches thick
2. Twelve tabbed dividers (I like them with pockets for articles/pictures/etc.)
3. A generous amount of lined paper
4. A three-hole puncher

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Suggested Sections for Your Notebook

Label your tabbed dividers as follows:

Situation
Theme
Plot
Chronology
Characters
Names
Titles
Research on Characters
Research on Settings
Bibliography
Progress Calendar
Contacts/Emails

SITUATION

Describe the basic situation – this is the foundation on which your plot and characters will be built. What usually comes to a novelist first is a situation: *in media res*. You may read about some current event (or a historical one) that sparks an idea, or hear something that happened to someone and think, what if . . .

This section is for those nagging scraps of story that form in your head, then float away a few days later if you don't write them down.

THEME

Define the theme of your manuscript in one or two sentences. Then, elaborate by listing ways you will convey the theme throughout the book (this may become your one-line pitch).

If you have trouble with this section, look through books you've read (and liked), then pick out the theme. Study how the author weaves the theme through the book and brings the reader through the story to understand the meaning at the end. Avoid becoming too "heavy-handed" with it—balance it with other elements of fiction.

Most editors are looking for a rock-solid, high concept in your book; having your theme written down will help you keep your story on track.

Plot

Make a summarized outline, or chapter by chapter outline. If you have the basic ideas written down, you can divide it out point by point or chapter by chapter. List the main plot points. When this part is done, flesh out the novel at your leisure without worrying about getting lost in your story or going off on a tangent. You should know what your characters should accomplish in each chapter, thus you're working on the manageable sections. This will help you control the pacing of the novel, avoiding the "mid-book slump" where nothing of consequence occurs for pages and pages.

This process can also produce three necessary items to pitch your book:

--a one-sentence pitch line

--a one-paragraph pitch

--a synopsis (7 – 20 pages)

Chronology

Make a list of your major scenes or events in the order they will occur (especially important if using dual timelines). Record all pertinent facts that will have a bearing on how the story develops. Try to keep each description down to one sentence, so you can have the entire sequence in front of you on one or two pages. This process will make it easy to to see if the sequence makes sense, and if you have accuracy in all the details.

As you are working on your manuscript, check off your progress on the list.

Characters

This section is for biographies of your characters. These should include the one-page profile form that you find at the end of this booklet. Fill out one of these forms for each of your main characters. Use this form as a guideline to write a few notes about secondary characters, as well.

You may wish to write a more detailed biographical sketch of the leading characters. Some authors include character sketches in their proposals

Also, be sure to include every character's name. Avoid names that start with the same letter; a good source is online "baby books" for names.

Titles

Write down *all* title ideas. Any time an idea comes into your head about a possible title, write it down. However, don't grow too attached to your working title because often publishers will change the title (especially to suit a marketing angle). No doubt, you will have input on this alteration!

Do think of titles that convey the "bigger concept" or "theme" of the novel, and what kind of title would make a reader want to pick up your book to read.

Research on Characters

The more believable and well-rounded your characters are, the more your readers will enjoy your book.

Always double check the facts of your characters' background. If they are historical figures, read through biographies, journals, and letters. Also, if you interview anyone for information on your characters (primary research), record their name, date you spoke to them, and how to contact them in the future.

Research on Settings

If at all possible, you should physically visit the place where your story is set to grasp a feel for its sights, sounds, and textures—especially if it is a foreign locale. Certainly, you can use Google Earth as a fall back, if a trip isn't possible.

However, in your research you will want to have a map of the city, including streets (if historical, use a map from that era), pictures of sites where you might place a scene, and snippets of interesting facts that provide readers with a sense they are learning something about the place.

Bibliography

List all books you use for research, including letters, journals, biographies, etc.

List any people you have interviewed for your primary research.

Print and include any articles that you have found on the Internet and have them in a separate section.

[This section is particularly important if you're writing a series and need to come back to certain research repeatedly.]

Progress Calendar/Queries

This section is *really* important to keep your writing schedule on track.

Phase 1—Planning: Record the dates/times that you actually spend in front of the computer, plotting and sketching out characters.

***Phase 2—Writing*:** When you begin your manuscript, have an idea of how many pages you want to produce daily or weekly and try to stick with that creative flow.

Phase 3—Revision: When you begin to re-write, keep a record of the chapter you work on each day.

Phase 4—Queries: Keep a complete list of each time you send out the manuscript and to whom.

In Conclusion

You may end up added extra sections to your notebook to suit your personal writing style, and you may find some of the suggested sections unnecessary. Put them in what ever order makes your most comfortable.

Make a new notebook for each novel you work on. After you have submitted your manuscript, and it is accepted, keep the notebook handy for the time when you will start working with your editor on multiple revisions. You will also be able to have a quick reference for any questions the editor may have about some aspect of your book.

This content is adapted from the following work:

Whitney, Phyllis. *Guide to Fiction Writing.* Boston, 1982.