

## STARTING YOUR NOVEL

As I have written in my latest book *The Writer Within You*, perhaps the finest and most accurate advice that can be given to a beginning novelist comes from that great writer Somerset Maugham. He states, "There are three rules for the writing of a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are."

It's true that many successful books deviate from what is supposed to be the basic structure of the novel. But it's important to understand the fundamentals before venturing off in your own unique direction.

However, things are not necessarily as bleak for beginners as Maugham's declaration asserts. Guidelines are available. Basic rules and techniques do exist to help you sustain your reader's interest and excitement through 300 or more pages of text. Over the next few weeks, we will review most of those, and help guide you on the path to success as a fiction writer.

There are reasons why a reader selects a specific novel and considers it enthralling and worthwhile, but finds another dull and discards it by page 3. Together, we'll try hard to avoid falling into that second category.

### Key Questions

For those of you who have always dreamed of writing a novel, but never have, I'd like to start at the very beginning by having you ask yourself several important questions that I am asked regularly. So let's get them answered and out of the way before we begin our analysis of how to produce a first rate novel.

1. *How long should my book be?* The majority of novels run between 250 and 400 words. But there is no definitive length that you must adhere to. The answer is to make it long enough to present the action and the characters effectively while keeping it short enough not to bore the reader.
2. *What length should my chapters be?* The average usually falls between 10 And 25 double spaced typed pages. However, there is no standard length. Effective chapters can be only a few sentences long if the writer is attempting to create a particular ambience. Conversely, a chapter can extend for as long as it takes the author to tell the story.

3. *Is there a prescribed length for my paragraphs?* Once again, the answer is no. The average seems to run between 10 and 15 lines. But within the same book, you might find a three line graph followed by one that is 30 lines long. As with sentences, the writing should be short and clipped when attempting to create an action scene or tension.
4. *How can I find out how many words I have written?* You will find that capability on most PC's by clicking on "tools" in the upper menu bar. If you want to estimate it yourself, calculate on the basis of 250 words per page double spaced and written in 12 point type.
5. *How much should I try to write every day?* The answer is very simple: as much as you are comfortable doing. The two important factors here are (a) writing regularly even if you don't feel at all inspired and (b) when on a roll, don't stop. You can always go back and edit and rewrite if not satisfied. The key is to write...to get your words and thoughts down on paper. The polishing can come later.

Now let's talk about the document itself. Like everything else, a book has a beginning, a middle and an end. Each of these segments has a specific role in a novel. The opening is designed to catch the reader's interest and launch him/her into the book. The central portion carries the story through the protagonist's ups and down while trying to overcome the challenge described in the opening. The book ends when the protagonist accomplishes his/her goal or fails. So let's begin with the opening, and explore the other segments in future columns.

### **The Invitation**

Think of the first several paragraphs of your new book as an invitation to the reader to enter the special world you are writing about. Just as you have no desire to RSVP to an invitation to what seems like a dull, drab party, so the reader will accept only if those first graphs convince him/her that it will be worthwhile spending the hours it takes to read and reach the end.

Donald Maas, a literary agent who has written the excellent book *Writing the Breakout Novel*, cautions, "The number one mistake I see in manuscript submission is a failure to put the main conflict in place quickly enough....(Conflict) makes us care by bonding us to a character. It sustains our interest through constant development and escalation."

In those opening paragraphs, you must lay out the challenge that faces your protagonist. Phrased another way that means you have to state the goal that your protagonist must reach. That becomes the first of the critical elements that constitute the flow of a well-constructed novel. The others will follow naturally from this beginning. As the protagonist moves toward attaining his/her goal, obstacles arise. These intensify the conflict. Tension develops, and as the conflict is overcome, a period of momentary relief takes over until the protagonist stumbles over his/her next hurdle.

That sequence occurs over and over again, until the final resolution is reached. At that point, the book ends with the protagonist either successfully accomplishing his/her goal or failing. In the vast majority of novels, the protagonist is successful.

Of course, if this “roller coaster” of obstacles and resolutions is to be believable, it must be massaged to make each scene grow logically out of the ones that precede it. It must include strong development of the major characters to humanize them and make them believable. The degree to which the action, the characterizations and the narrative are logically integrated will determine the believability and the success of the book.