

Oh, Me? I'm a Novelist.

A step-by-step guide to getting on
your butt and doing some serious work

Step 1: Writing the Thing



A Two-Bite Guidebook
By Kevin Bridges

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The Visit

Your sister is back in town for a week to visit family and you have her, and her new fiancé, over for dinner. You've never met your sister's fiancé before, as it seems she has a new one every year.

Conversation flows easily over a dinner of chicken Parmesan, and the subject eventually moves to writing. Your sister, bless her heart, begins to gush about you. You write so well, even in middle school you were writing at college level. She goes on about the short stories of yours that have been published, and even some of the great compliments that you got in your rejection letters. You are sitting there, the center of attention, silently wishing that you hadn't gushed about your own writing to your sister. Eventually, forcefully, you change the subject.

Within a half-hour, the inevitable question comes up from your sister's fiancé. "So, what do you do for a living?"

You hesitate, only for the briefest moment, before answering. "I work at Costco. I do stocking." You try to say it casually, maybe even with some pride, but your sister has got you thinking about your writing. Weren't you supposed to be a published author by now? Giving signed books to your friends and family, hosting book readings, maybe even a guest on a talk show or two? When was the last time you wrote? Six months ago? No, more like a year.

The silence lasts a moment too long. You wonder

how many talented authors ended up stocking shelves. Before long, conversation picks up again, and your unfulfilled dreams are forgotten, except for by you.

That night, sitting alone in the bedroom, you open the dusty folder in your hard drive, and you could swear you actually hear the manilla paper creak when you click the icon.

Scrolling to the middle of the manuscript that was supposed to break you out of the working world, you're impressed. It had looked shabby in your memory, but it's actually funny, and exciting in parts. Will anyone ever see it?

You hit the X in the corner, and sigh. What's the use? The last time you opened that thing up, you wrote about five hundred words over the span of two days and then Thanksgiving happened, and your book got moved to the back burner, and then off of the stove.

You go to bed.

One year passes, and your sister comes back to town with a brand new fiancé, and stays at your house for dinner. Because she is not a being of tact, she ends up gushing about your writing again, and the question of what you do comes up. You answer quickly.

"I'm an aspiring novelist, trying to get rid of the *aspiring*. I've just started looking for an agent for my first book, "Alyssa's Tree," and am in the middle of editing my second, which still doesn't have a title. I

work at Costco on the side, until I can sell one of these things.”

That's a big turnaround for twelve months. But is it possible? Is that dusty given-up-on novel ever going to be resuscitated, and pulled through to its last chapter? How about that twinkle of an idea that has spun around and around in your head while you were cooking dinner, or driving to the store?

Why the hell not? What's standing in your way? Procrastination? Writers block? Not enough time during the day? Try walking through the bookstore, looking at the author names, thousands and thousands of people, just like you. Many of them have, in one way or another, been the skilled writer that was trapped in a job that didn't suit them. Virtually all of them had procrastination, writer's block and lack of time standing between them and success. Many of them were asked “So what do you do for a living,” and had to give an unsatisfactory answer, back before the first publisher gave them a nice thumbs-up. Yet there they are, their names staring at you from the bookshelves of a national chain.

So what is standing in your way? Well, you are, my friend. Now, let's go write a novel.

This Book

This eBook exists to help you write your first novel, and make the first notch on your bedpost. I have good news and bad news, though. The fact is that, when you're on a roll, writing a novel is one of the

more exciting things you can do, and is not as hard as it looks. However, writing a novel is not the same as publishing a novel, and is, in my mind, the easiest part of a rather long, and often trying, process. This is more true for the first-time novelist than to someone already agented and published. Enjoy this part for what it's worth.

I'll write subsequent eBooks on the subjects of editing, finding an agent, working with your agent, and then marketing your book, but that's for later. Right now, let's sit at that laptop (or desktop, or typewriter, or legal pad) and get this thing off the ground.

Short Stories

Maybe you've never been able to publish any of your short stories, and it seems wise to skip right to novels. Well, let me tell you something; when you're looking for an agent for your work, a couple of steps from now, every good query letter has a list of "publishing credits." Every short story you've had published is like a little stamp that says, "This writer has been approved by other literary professionals."

You may write like JK Rowling and Robert Frost rolled into one, but there are plenty of publishers out there that will never experience the sweet caress of your words if you haven't done the legwork first.

Don't go into the battle without your armor on, don't take a shower without grabbing a towel first, and don't intend to publish your breakout novel without a single short story under your belt. By all means, write a

novel, write one today, but please remember that skipping the easy step (short stories) makes the hard step (novels) so much harder.

Time Constraints

You don't have the time to write. I understand that. In between obligation A and obligations B, C and D, not to mention the ever-so-important moment of relaxation that you're sometimes able to squeeze in, there are no extra seconds left over with which to put finger to key, and create what you were built to create. Fine.

Now think of the name of a bestselling author, and I'll bet you a sack of diamonds that they could glance at your schedule and find at least an hour and a half of writing waiting to happen every day. They'd be getting that fight scene done during your break at work, taking twenty minutes to write expository dialog while the rice is simmering, telling the significant other that they need to spend an hour alone between eight and nine, while CSI Las Vegas is on.

Once you crank writing up the priority list a few notches, you'll find that, not only is there enough time to write regularly, but that watching the evening news suddenly may not fit into your schedule.

Television

Now that I've mentioned television, I think I'll stick with that for a minute. In our modern lifestyle, there are a number of distractions that can leave a person sitting

in place, doing essentially nothing, for hours at a time (something that should seem strange). Television is still the king of this. It's true that the Internet is up there, too, but now that you can watch television on the Internet, the distinction has blurred.

I'm not going to suggest that you throw your TV out a second story window (or take it to a pawn shop) but I'll mention that, from experience and observation, willfully telling Comcast that you could maybe live without the new Gossip Girl can be freeing, money-saving, and not as painful as you might expect.

And if the Eye of Sauron in the corner of the living room ever closes for good, you may find that you have more time than you know what to do with.

Just a suggestion.

Routine

Routine is essential. This means writing every day. It's preferable to write at the same time every day (even more preferable if it's in the morning).

Your writing routine is all about keeping up momentum. Momentum is your best friend in any long project, and if you don't fight it, it will carry you to, and through, the epilogue of your book. Then you will have done something that most people will never think themselves capable of. You will have written a book.

Let's say you want to write a 90,000 word long book.

This is on the short end of average novel length. If you sit and write 1000 words a day, you're done in ninety days. Simple as that.

Keep your eye on the prize. Imagine that, three or four months from now, you might have a completed first draft with your name on it. A thick stack of printed pages that you can set on the end table and blush whenever someone says, "Oh, what's that?"

Sitting Down

As a rule, writing is easier than sitting down to write. It's like the child that fights going to sleep for thirty minutes, and then, when they finally do, doesn't want to get up.

You want to do whatever you can just to get your butt planted, and to get your fingers on home row (or however you choose to put the letters down). Once you're down, make a note of whatever your word count is, plus a thousand. Keep writing until this reflects your current word count. Write beyond this if you have time. With 1000 words, it's not necessary to take a lot of breaks, and breaks can turn a one to two hour writing period into six hours. Keep that butt planted, and keep your attention focused.

There are tricks you can play on yourself. I used to sit, telling myself I was ready to just write a couple of sentences and be done, knowing that once I started I would keep writing. As a general rule, though, tricking yourself into things is a crutch, and actually having the willpower to sit and do something you don't feel like

doing is a solid skill that will help you in a wide range of life's challenges.

Writing Space

You need a special writing space where you can do your work, all at once. This can mean a number of different things. At one point in my life it was my bedroom, at another point it was the computer in the living room. Lately I just sit on the living room couch with headphones on.

A good writing space has a few important qualities.

1. It's comfortable, so you can relax while you work and not be distracted by discomfort. You also don't want it so comfortable that you'll be falling asleep on slower writing days. Fatigue is no joke.
2. It's quiet or, better for some of us, loud enough to drown out distractions. Some people concentrate better when all they can hear is the fridge buzzing, and some concentrate better when the Offspring are pulverizing their ear drums. Do what works.
3. Lack of human interaction. There is nothing more distracting than people asking you questions, or just trying to grab your attention for the sake of being social. Don't expect the people around you to realize how much of an impact their little comments make on the speed of your work. Writing while talking is like running through waist-deep water.

Fatigue

Welcome to modern society. I hope you already slept.

For all of the media focus on avoiding trans-fatty acids, exercising, and getting your vitamins, there's remarkably little encouragement to go get enough sleep. Your amount of sleep affects your body very thoroughly, and being underslept is just plain not healthy.

We're all so productive and hard working any more, that getting five or six hours, and then taxing your mind and body all day, is so smiled upon it's nearly heroic. Anyone who sleeps their full eight hours is probably a stoner, may live with their parents, and sure isn't moving up in the world.

This is BS, of course. Take your multivitamin, swallow your fish oil, go jogging, and *make sure you sleep enough*.

If you're writing your book, and find that you're so tired it feels like your brain is sliding down your spine, take a nap. It doesn't even have to be a long nap. When I find myself dizzy from fatigue in the middle of my work time, I tend to lay my head on the arm of the couch until I blink in and out of sleep a couple of times, and then I will usually get up and feel quite rejuvenated. I know everyone sleeps differently, so if this doesn't work for you, may have to find another solution. Fatigue may try to stop your work in its tracks, and you can't let it.

Writer's Block

Writer's block is common enough that everybody's heard of it, even people who haven't written since their final exams in high school. I'm sure it's killed millions of half-written novels over the years, many of them fantastic.

Writer's block is like a rite of passage for an author and, sadly, many do not come out on the other side. This is regrettable, because writer's block can be overcome.

A common cause of writer's block is not knowing what to do next. Maybe you've put your character in a situation that he/she can't possibly get out of, or you have no idea where the next scene is going. Maybe the book is not turning out the way you'd hoped, and everything ahead of you is uncharted territory.

Well, how's this for a solution? Keep writing.

Okay, it's not necessarily that simple, but it's close. The real solution, that will keep you writing straight through your block, is to write *badly*. Can't solve your character's problem? Come up with something stupid, and move on. Not confident about writing your upcoming fight scene - chase scene - sex scene - technical explanation? Just write something that's not quite good enough. The goal is to stop worrying, and start typing.

You have to keep in mind that what you're writing is your first draft, and it's for your eyes only. Once the problem is solved, and your main character has

settled down in that little cabin he/she has always dreamt about, then will be the time to go back and polish your rough edges, and close your plot holes. That is when you can allow yourself to worry.

Outlining

So, how's that outline coming? You got all those complex interactions between the characters mapped out? Well, I don't know what to tell you. You may have just wasted your time.

There is a place for outlines, and it's nonfiction. When you write a book about building soap-box racers, an outline is invaluable. Even this guidebook was built around an outline. In a novel, though, an outline is likely to get in your way.

Writing a novel can be a humbling experience because, as you sit and write it, you come to realize that you're not necessarily in charge. Of course the author's decisions play an essential role in the shaping of the story, but at the same time, authors often find themselves writing scenes that, even an hour before, they'd had no way to predict.

The reason an outline doesn't work is that it's too distant. It's like trying to plan a local road by looking at a map of the whole state. It might look good when you draw it, but when you zoom in, you realize that there are buildings, existing roads, and geographic features in your way.

In the outline, it may make sense that Tom's brother

came to the house drunk and stumbling, and ended up leaving his cell-phone behind. A friend in organized crime calls, Tom answers, and his adventure begins.

While you're writing it, though, you've got to make a scene and a setting. When Tom's brother shows up, he's drunk indeed, and his clothes are soaking wet. It seems he fell into a lake. Now you realize his phone doesn't work. He has to use Tom's computer to check his email, though, and doesn't sign off. Tom gets curious, and takes a peek. It fits Tom's brothers' character that there would be an email from a sexy woman, so you scribble that in for a dash of characterization. As things unfold, though, this email makes sense connected to another event, and becomes a major plot point, and your outline begins to look like a completely different story.

While you're brainstorming, though, and getting excited about a new idea, an outline can be a lot of fun. When it's time to sit down, though, just stick it somewhere out of sight and forget about it.

Grammar and Spelling

We writers, we're a bunch of artists, but we happen to practice a fairly mainstream art. None of us is ever going to get the facial recognition of Brad Pitt, but there is a market for our work, if we do it well.

As artists, it's natural to hate being held back by conventions. Our muse, after all, is not a being of conventions. When you want to express yourself as a

writer, any list of memorized rules just looks like hoops to jump through. Plus, there are many natural storytellers that can't tell a comma from a shrimp, so why should they be held back?

Well, Writer, be thankful for all of the things in the world that you don't have to learn, because this is something that you do. Look up the rules, memorize them. Besides this, though, you should make a practice of paying attention to the grammar in the novels you read.

When you're reading published books, slow down a little bit, see what side of the quotation mark the period falls on, where the comma is and isn't, where the paragraph breaks are. This is a way of not necessarily learning what's right in the English language, but of what has made it through the publishing house and onto the shelves before. Not everything you see in today's novels conforms strictly to what's "right." But by immersing yourself in the form of existing literature, you'll be more and more able to naturally pick out the things in your own writing that will not fly.

The golden rule to becoming a better writer is this: Read a lot, write a lot.

Read-a-lot-write-a-lot

I sure hope you like reading novels. I wouldn't want a plumber fixing my roof, and I wouldn't want someone with only magazines on their bookshelf writing me a novel.

Read fiction all you can. Maybe your house-mates, glancing at you while you sit at the far end of the couch with an old John Grisham, will call you anti-social, or lazy, but as you turn those pages you're doing very important work, and easy work at that. As enjoyable as reading a book (hopefully) is to you, you're conditioning your brain. You're seeding your creativity, seeing examples of what works and what doesn't, and flavoring your own style. Don't read all Stephen King, or Dan Brown. Read everything you can stomach. Go back in time and read some Mark Twain, try out a romance novel, see if science fiction can get your motor running. Don't discriminate, because this is your classroom, and your tuition is a library card.

The other half of the equation is write a lot. Nobody's first paragraph of fiction is going to be great. There's a good chance that their thousandth won't either. Once you start writing good paragraphs, keep writing, and you'll be writing better paragraphs soon.

A thousand words a day. It's not so much as to be overwhelming, but it's enough to make good progress. Finished your novel? Write a short story. Start another novel. Why not?

Word Counts

A thousand words adds up to about three pages of a printed novel, maybe less. Ninety thousand is a shorter novel. A short story might be between one and five thousand, or as long as ten thousand. If you

don't already, start thinking of writing as happening in thousands of words.

Take estimations of some novels you own, by counting how many words are on a page, and then how many pages. See how big a ninety thousand word book is, or a hundred fifty thousand word book.

Especially for a new (not-yet-profitable) author, publishers will feel warmer toward manuscripts that fall on the lower end of this scale, or even below, which will cost less to print. You should start with a goal in mind, and keep an eye on your word count as you write, so that you don't have to rush to avoid too long of a manuscript. Monitoring your word count while you write is not as difficult as it may sound.

NaNoWriMo

<http://www.nanowrimo.com>

National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) is a competition (really more of a game) hosted every November by Chris Batey at the NaNoWriMo website. After signing up, your goal is simply to write a full novel, start to finish, between November first and November thirtieth.

Impossible you say? Not impossible. Not improbable. Talk to some folk who have been writing novels all of their lives, and it's not even something to bite your nails about.

The NaNoWriMo novel has to be only fifty-thousand

words long (this adds up to a little over sixteen hundred words a day), and the first and last words of the story have to be written within November.

Fifty thousand words is a good strong novella, and some (myself included) up their own personal goal to ninety or a hundred thousand words. There is an interactive graph on the site that helps you keep visual track of your day-to-day progress.

To a seasoned novelist, NaNoWriMo may not be anything special, but to the beginner it's solid gold. Once you've written a novel, you're now a person that can write a novel. It's no longer beyond you. Not only that, but it's an opportunity to face, and defeat, writer's block. When you've only got thirty days to write the thing, you can't just sit out a day. You also aren't going to be sitting around worrying about your plot progression. If you just sit and write, and write, and write, you will begin to notice that the plot is largely taking care of itself.

So, wait until November, and take that dreamed-of novel and turn it into a solid thing that exists, even if only on a hard drive.

Plus, there isn't much better writing practice than to write a whole novel. NaNoWriMo, followed through with, can be somewhat painful, but a growth experience usually is.

Starting now (a couple of minutes from now)

You could wait until November (realizing, of course,

that November is a real thing that will happen) or you could start your novel now.

As in, look at the clock, add just enough time to put away this eBook, and that's when you start your novel.

What's your first line? Have you already got it worked out?

Maybe it's, "Ron was perspiring." Or, "It's a low quality homemade video, likely taken from a webcam." Or, "It was midnight before I realized where I'd seen her before."

And once you've got that mark on the paper, you can branch out, and fill up, and expand down the pages, through the opening scene, introducing characters, and home lives, or work lives, setting the stage for the significant first event or person to enter in.

Can't you feel it? Haven't you already thought about this enough?

Just write it. Put it down. Open up your Microsoft Word, or your OpenOffice.org Writer, and surprise yourself.

Now.

Please.

Stop worrying about if you're ready, if you're going to have enough time. Replace your worrying with

creating. Stop being someone who would love to write a novel, and become a novelist.

What's your first line?