

Outlining

Many things about the writing process seem fascinating, even mystical, to the layman. A lot of people I meet at book signings or through email seem quite awed by the concept of conceiving, building, then executing a book the length of ELANTRIS or MISTBORN. (Both of which are around 200,000 words long, making them around 500 pages in hardback or 600-700 pages in paperback.)

Even a lot of amateur authors get frustrated with the process of storytelling, particularly when they look at the large picture. Indeed, plotting on the large scale is probably the most common problem I notice with newer authors--often they can write very well when you look at their stories on the paragraph, or even page, level. However, their writing tends to break down when looked across the scope of an entire book.

I'll be frank. This is hard, perhaps the hardest part about the process of crafting a novel. I've met lots of people who, by sheer number of pages writing, should have completed several novels. However, many of them have dozens of stories where they've gotten a few chapters into a book, only to get frustrated, uninterested, or simply find themselves uncertain what to write next.

I don't have all of the answers. Indeed, I've found that it's very difficult to offer advice about writing, since every writer seems to have a process of their own. However, what I can do is talk about some of the methods I've seen work for other authors, then explain my own process. I've found that seeing what I do can sometimes help other authors figure out their own process.

In all of this, I suggest that you remember one cardinal rule of writing: find out what works for you, then do that. Try different things, but don't think you have to always work on books the way that I do it, or the way anyone else does it. Becoming a successful author is about practice, and I believe that the most important thing to learn while practicing is to understand yourself as a writer.

Writer Type One: The Multi-Drafter (a.k.a. The Freewriter)

I notice two basic extremes in writer types. Most people aren't either of these extremes, but fall somewhere in-between. However, I've seen a lot of writers lean one way or the other.

I'm not actually a multi-drafter, I lean a bit more toward the one-drafter explained below. However, I know a lot of professional writers who talk more about being multi-drafters than they are one-drafters. Now, when I use the terms "one drafter" and "multi-drafter" don't assume that I'm talking about the revision process. That's something completely different. In this context, I'm simply referring to the way that the author produces their story--the way they develop the concepts, the plots, the character arcs, and the other things that make up a novel.

The multi-drafter is an author who discovers their story as they write it. They tend to do a lot of free writing, and they tend to like to explore characters and plots through the actual writing process. They'll come up with one idea, then write something about it. Then, they'll come up with another idea and the book will change direction. And, as they write those ideas, they'll be sparked toward other ones.

If you hear authors talk about 'organic' writing, or if they mention that sometimes their characters 'surprise' them, then they're probably multi-drafters. Now, I know a lot of newer authors who simply try writing this way, as if it were the only way to write books. They plunge right in and see where it goes.

There's nothing wrong with this method. If you find that this way works better than outlining for you, then you shouldn't feel guilty for not outlining. Remember the cardinal rule: Do what works for you.

There are two dangers with this type of writing, however. The first is that if you do it, but never try outlining, you may miss out on tools that would end up working very well for you as an author. The second danger, however, is more pressing. (At least, I think so.) The danger for a multi-drafter is that of letting one of your early freewrites stand as your finished product.

It may appear, at first, that the freewriter has a less difficult task than the outliner. After all, the outliner has to spend all that time up front before he or she can actually begin writing. However, the freewriter generally doesn't know the ending of their story before they get to it. That means that their drafts are going to be A LOT more sloppy than the drafts of the outliner. All of the time that the outliner spends up front preparing, the freewriter has to spend on the back-end rewriting.

So, if you discover that you're a straight-up freewriter, I'd suggest looking very seriously at the revision process. You'll have to learn to not get too attached to characters, plots, chapters, and ideas--because they have to be fluid for you. You have to be willing to toss away things that work, but just don't work with the other ideas.

This is the real trouble with amateurs who try to use this method without really understanding it--they don't have the experience and practice it takes to make a sloppy, freewrite draft and turn it into a polished novel with plotting that doesn't seem haphazard.

Writer Type Two: The single-drafter (or, the Outliner)

As can likely be surmised from the above examples, the extreme opposite of the freewriter is the outliner. I call these single-drafters because they tend to bang out a single, relatively-polished draft on the first try. This doesn't mean they don't have to rewrite! It simply means that most of the basic mechanics of their story--the plot arcs, the character development, the themes--come out the way they want it to in the first draft.

They do this, generally, by preparing extensive outlines ahead of time. They do a lot of their 'freewriting' in brainstorm form on paper or screen, re-arranging things, coming up with plots, and placing ideas all before they ever start writing any prose. Part of the reason this works for them is because they know their own writing process--they know how to differentiate between things they can connect and fill in while writing, and things they need to understand before they get to a certain point in the plot. Some extreme outliners create a point by point outline, then turn this directly into their synopsis by filling out the points, then turn THIS directly into their first draft, point by point, with very few revisions to their outline structure. The outline, with work, transforms into the book.

Outlining has its own dangers. The first is that, without a knowledge of your own writing style, outlining can be very frustrating, and even a little pointless. I've known many authors to create vast, extensive outlines, then who begin writing and immediately write themselves in a completely different direction, invalidating much of the work they'd just done. Also, outliners have the danger of never actually getting to the prose part of their writing! I think that dear old Grandpa Tolkien might have been a little on this side, as he's said to have spent years and years planning his books before he decided to write them.

(And, if that's the way you want to go, then do what works for you. However, if you want to make a living at writing in our current market, you might want to learn how to produce materials just a

little bit more quickly.)

One final danger with being an outliner (and this is one I had specifically) is that of never rewriting. Just because you're a first drafter--and you tend to get it write on the first try (and, if you don't, you tend to rewrite immediately and fix whatever is bothering you)--that doesn't mean you don't have to go back and fix things when the first draft is complete. There will still be a lot of polishing to do, you just tend to develop the major pieces--plot, character, setting--before you start.

My own Process

As I said, you're probably not in either of the above groups. But, it's good to know the extremes, because you probably fall closer to either side--and have some of their same hang-ups.

My process is a little bit toward the one-drafting method. I started out trying the freewriting method, and my first few books were train-wrecks. (Which is nothing unusual--that's the way it is with most people.) I had good characters and interesting settings, but the stories fell apart as I wrote. Plus, I learned that I detest rewriting. When I finish a story, I want it to be DONE. I've since learned to force myself to rewrite, and I think I've gotten pretty good at it. However, I'm more fulfilled as a writer if I can get most of it right on the first try.

Another reason I consider myself more of a one drafter is because I have to know where I'm going before I start. I need an ending. I feel lost in a story if I don't have a climax in mind, and I have trouble writing a character if I don't know where how they are supposed to progress. However, I do enjoy the discovery of writing. If everything is TOO rigid, then I don't do well making connections and coming up with innovative ways to be clever with my plot.

So, I've grown to follow what I call a 'Points on the Map' philosophy of writing. I've heard some other writers speak of similar methods--some call this a 'floating outline' method, so I know I'm not unique. I do think that this is a good way to have some of the organization of an outline without losing spontaneity.

So, I'll give you an example of this method. Let's assume that I've already done the other pieces of prewriting--I have characters, and I know their general personalities, conflicts, and character arcs. I know the setting of my world, and have the culture, magic, and visual setting pretty well defined. (I will, of course, fill in smaller details as I write.)

Then we come to plot. As I've said, I need an ending before I can begin writing. Generally, when I'm preparing to write a story, it's a dramatic ending that makes me want to finally sit down and write the book. I write for endings. In ELANTRIS, the events of the last few chapters were by far my favorite in the book--and I had them in mind from page one.

So, what I do is I begin building myself a 'map' to follow as I write. It will start like this:

Part One

Part Two

Part Three

Part Four

Generally, I start with four 'parts', though this will change--contracting or expanding depending on how many large climaxes I envision. Next, I think of the really important events in the book--the climaxes, if you will. While I've been planning the book, I've imagined important scenes that

stand out to me, and these usually have something important to do with character or plot.

So, I take my parts, arrange my important scenes--my points on the map, as it were--in order. Then I add bullet points listing the scenes, using them to focus how my plot is going to occur. The following is off the cuff, and isn't really all that specific--but, remember, the point here is to remind myself of scenes I've already imagined.

Part One:

- Bob Learns that he is the Mystic gardener.
- Sally finds a nasty tree in her gardens.

Part Two:

- Bob is dramatically driven out of his village by talking potatoes.
- Sally breaks up with her fiancé over the spinach incident.

Part Three:

- Bob fights with the main villain in the pumpkin patch.
- Sally discovered inside the largest pumpkin.

Part Four:

- Bob ascends to be king.

From here, we have a pretty good beginning framework. However, this really only includes the major plot points. Now, I look at this and decide what exactly I have to have happen before each of these can occur. For instance:

Part One

- Bob learns that he is the mystic gardener.
 - Introduce Bob and his family
 - Show Bob working in the fields.
 - Introduce the prophet.
 - Show Bob and the prophet talking together.
 - Show Bob's problems with his family.
 - Hint at Bob's magical ability with plants.
 - Hint at that magical ability again.
 - Begin showing the dangers of the talking potatoes.

And so forth. Obviously, in my actually book outlines, things would be just a tad detailed. However, I don't think that they'd be all that coherent to anyone but myself. These are reminders, or sometimes instructions, rather than explanations.

Once I have the progression above finished for each of my big scenes, I can fill in other scenes where holes have been created. Some of these are vague, and I tend to have far more bullet points about the first part than I do about latter parts. That's because as I write, I add new bullet points as the middle sections of the book become more and more clear to me.

There are a few other things I add bullet points about as well. One of these is character progression. You'll notice that the points above deal with plot almost exclusively. I build characters like I do plots, however, and stick those points in amongst the others. I focus on big changes, imagining

where I want the character to be at the ending. For instance, if Bob's character arc is composed of two main points: 1) That he's too shy and 2) That he hates plants, then I'll need to do something like the following.

- Part one: Bob's character
 - Show Bob disliking plants.
 - Show Bob being shy.
 - Force him to work in the garden.
 - Show him coming to enjoy plants as he makes tomatoes grow.
 - He leaves the village, and has to become more bold as he is looked to as the hero who will save them.
 - Against his will, is set up as a savior from the potatoes.

Those points would be intermixed, in my outline, with the plot points above. One final group I sometimes add involves the mysteries of the book. If, for instance, I'm planning a big reveal--say that the talking potatoes are really talking peas in disguise--I'll write out a list of sequential bullet points which explain how I'm going to foreshadow this mystery, and how I'm going to reveal information about it in small pieces.

Then, it's time to start writing! I look at the next couple of bullet points, decide how to put those into a scene and include the information they indicate, and craft a chapter out of them in my head. At this point, I add rising and falling action for the chapter specifically, and try to tie it together into a cohesive mini-story. Each chapter, in my opinion, should have a feeling of completeness to it. However, since I already know what is IN the chapter, I can focus on how to get the information across in a way that shows character, reveals plot, and illustrates the world.

I add new bullet points as I write, developing the plot and characters as they become more firm in my mind. Things start rolling, and eventually I get to the ending--which, by that point, has been enhanced quite a bit in my mind through all of the ideas and connections I've made while writing the rest of the book. That is why my books tend to have rather explosive endings.

Conclusion

Well, there you have it. A look at outlining and the writing process through my eyes. Let me reiterate that what works for one person won't necessarily work for anyone else, particularly when it comes to the writing process. However, I think the 'floating outline' method I have going is a nice balance between a hard, strict outline and the freedom of an improvisational book. It means that my novels come out rather strong on the first draft, as I can foreshadow big events. But, it also lets me innovate and change as I go, since the format of the outline is actually rather lax.

For other advice, be sure to check out my website, www.brandonsanderson.com.

Best,

Brandon