

6 - Chapter Breakdown, last of the mechanics

In the previous article I took the liberty of using the words of N.D. Walsch to take a slightly off topic step. In this one I am back on track.

In article 4 I talked about plotting and touched briefly on the concept of the chapter breakdown - for me this is an important step in the process.

It's all too easy to want to hasten the process and just get on with the actual novel, and I am sure there are plenty of novelists who are capable of doing so, but I would strongly recommend that a novice novelist take the time to do a chapter breakdown. The chapter breakdown will serve more than one purpose. Not only will it give more clarity to your initial inspiration, but it will also be a valuable aid in letting your characters evolve. And even more importantly, by going through the mechanics of a chapter breakdown, you will be able to see if there's enough 'meat on the bones' of your plot. If at this stage the plot cannot be padded out into about fifteen chapters, then there's not enough story to grow into a novel.

Given that you do have a fifteen-chapter story, then the breakdown will be an invaluable aid in your writing of the novel-in-progress. On those dull days when you feel overwhelmed by this project the chapter breakdown will do just that – break it down into manageable parts. It will also be your guide, and keep your mind clear and your thoughts directed. It will serve as a map and hold your focus. If you have chosen a less traditional novel form, one without the constraints of chronology, geography or historical context, then using the chapter breakdown will be your structure. I don't know whether Michael Ondaatje used a chapter breakdown when writing "The English Patient," but I do know that were I to write such a complex novel, then I would definitely take the time to map out the story in this form.

There are novelists who shy away from a chapter breakdown, believing it will take the spontaneity out of their writing, and prevent the plot from developing and the characters to unfold naturally. And certainly I would agree with this opinion, if you choose to stick to the initial chapter breakdown as though it was written in blood. But if you give yourself the freedom to change and adapt, or swap chapters around, or re-write a whole section, then no, this need not be the case. Then the advantages then outweigh the disadvantages.

And now, with the chapter breakdown completed the first hurdle to your novel presents itself in the form of the OPENING SENTENCE. I have a rather simplistic solution to this – just write whatever comes into your head in order to get the story going. You can always change it at a later stage, even when the first draft is completed. At that stage the story will have grown into its own style and tone and chances are that even if you'd struggled for weeks on that elusive first sentence, you'd want to change it now, anyway! So spare yourself the headache.

I mentioned the word momentum earlier in the article. Now that you've written that first word, put that first, virgin idea onto paper (or your word processor), make an appointment with yourself in the same way you would with a colleague, friend or family member, that you will sit in your writing chair at a certain time every day or week. Inspired or not, you will write something. By making this appointment you are creating momentum.

Eventually writing will become as much a part of your daily routine as brushing your teeth. The novel will inhabit your thoughts. The plot will unfold; the characters will talk to you. The novel will live, become real, tangible almost. And who cares if you fail to get it word perfect first time. Just go with the flow. Enjoy the ride. Remember that this is a first draft, and it can always be adapted and improved. A blank page is just a blank page!

When you reach a point where you miss the writing if you break that appointment, when you feel restless when not writing, when you don't break that appointment because 'something else' comes up, you know you are a true writer. You know you have committed to this project.

And on those days when, despite your dedication you sit in your writing chair, and the characters do not speak to you, then do as Ann Lamott suggests in her inspirational writing guide "Bird by Bird" and take a pen and a note pad and write. Journalise, scribble, write the first thing that comes into your head. Just write. And don't stop until you've written 300 words.

This is mental aerobics. And it works for several reasons, some of which will be dealt with in subsequent articles.