



EPISODE 16

Pantsing v Plotting: Time to Talk Outlining

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Welcome back everyone! It's another Writer Wednesday and a brand spanking new episode of the Author Revolution Podcast. As always, I'm your host, Carissa Andrews. Ha, it's been all of sixteen episodes and I'm already saying as always. Oh boy...

Anyway... this week's episode should be a good one. We've talked about a lot of things on the podcast already, but none are as highly debatable in the writer world as today's topic. Yes, that's right... we're going to be talking about dropping your pants, setting them on fire, and dawning on a shiny new plotter's hat. Alright, so after that visual (you're welcome, btw), I hope you know I'm actually talking about transforming from a pantsier writer to a plotter – by way... of outlining.

Look, I get it. It's not sexy to outline. It's not the "fun" part of writing. Right? You have a story and you want to dive right in and start exploring. I've been where you are – I totally understand. However, after a decade in this writing business, I am also here to tell you that by not outlining, you are making the #1 Rookie Writer Mistake I've seen all emerging authors make (myself included).

Let me tell you a story... When I first started writing Pendomus, which was my first official novel, I had a great story idea and I was excited to immerse myself in the world. I could sense the story wanting to come out and I couldn't wait to make it come to life. I didn't know what I was doing, but I figured... "How hard can this really be?" Naïve, maybe. But that's honestly how I felt.



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Because NaNoWrimo 2010 was rolling around, I didn't take a whole lot of time to plan. Instead, I sorta took a few notes. Thought about what my characters were telling me, what my world building would look like, and then November hit. So, by the seat of my pants I flew, getting well over 50K words written that month. In fact, by the time I got what I thought was my first draft done – it actually had well over a hundred thousand words. And let me just make this clear. This is a YA scifi/fantasy novel.

While I knew I had something unique and interesting with the way it was written – I also felt lost. Did my story have an arc? What was it really that my characters were trying to accomplish in this first book? Did I succeed in making that clear? Honestly, I didn't know. I was just having fun telling the story and seeing where it led. The problem then was, how do I know if the book is any good? How do I know if I hit my mark? What even was my mark?

I didn't know what my genre was. It was this weird mashup of scifi, fantasy, dystopia, supernatural stuff, and magical creatures. It felt more fantasy than scifi – but it took place on another planet. All of this confusion led to two editors trying to make sense of my world and in the end, not doing a very good job of prettying it up.

I spent nearly THREE more years trying to get Pendomus in shape and all because I didn't understand my story, my genre, or where this particular book was trying to go. I wish I could say I learned my lesson for the next two books – and I sort of did – but not as well as I would have liked. After Pendomus was written, I took a hiatus from writing daily because I was in the middle of a divorce, remarriage, and having a baby. But all that time gave me insights into writing. I never stopped learning my craft. I discovered some of what I was missing, so for Polarities and Revolutions (the next two books), I did have a skeletal outline created so I understood what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it. But it wasn't detailed, and the story still did its own thing in a lot of ways, despite my best efforts.



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However, that being said, I hammered out both books between NaNoWriMo 2016 and the beginning of 2017. By the end of the year, both books were rapid released. One in October, the other in November. So, I had clearly made progress.

However, it wasn't until I wrote Oracle that I knew I was on to something with my outlining. That book took me a little over a month to write and it was released a couple of months later. Every book since then has been written quickly, edited quickly, and put up for sale. This year, I'm putting my money where my mouth is. I've crafted my skeletal outlines, my detailed outlines, and even out my entire series up for preorder a year before launch. I know I can write it quickly because I have past history and the tools to back me up. So, while to some, it might seem like a leap to put four books up for sale before they're written, to me, they are inevitable. (And yes, if you love the Marvel Universe, that was a nod at Thanos.)

Here's the thing... Taking the time to outline your novels has so many pros to outweigh the cons. If you're rolling your eyes, I truly do understand. I was there, too. I thought outlining would stifle my creativity and make my writing too formulaic. I might be analytical and like to organize, but I also like to be surprised... However, in embracing a full-on story outline, meaning, chapter-by-chapter, I've found I'm excited for the overall four-book arc. I know exactly where I'm heading with each character, so I'm able to drop Easter eggs intentionally as I write the first draft - rather than afterwards. And so much more.

Maybe at this point you're wondering how the heck you go ahead and outline. If you are, you're not alone. So, let's chat about it.

In my mind, there are three different outlines that you can use and each one is 100% better than the one before it. So, assuming you're starting at pantsing your story, the next step up would be:

1. Pure Summary – This is where you sit down and just write out an elevator pitch for your story in about 5-6 sentences. Determine what the hook of the story is and write the summary in a way that is clear to you and provides answers like – who, what, where, and why. For example: A seventeen-year-old girl runs away from a controlled society on a tidally locked planet. She’s attacked and left for dead, but saved by a group of people living outside the society. Throughout the story, she is being hunted by an evil villain, as well as learning she has powers that were kept at bay while inside. She learns she is part of a prophecy meant to return the planet to its original glory. But all of this will come at a price.

2. Skeletal Outline – This is honestly just a 2-3 sentence of your three major plot points: the inciting incident, the goal or main climax, and the resolution. You can do a little more detailed than that by including how you lay out your exposition in the beginning and the rising and falling action/conflict. Usually, this will take into consideration the three acts or the four quarters of a novel (which is a fancy way to break it down into more bite-size chunks). If you don’t know what the three acts or the four quarters are – hang tight because we will be talking about those in an upcoming podcast episode.

3. Chapter-by-Chapter Outline – This is one that I’ve really embraced this year and in part, thanks to my mentorship with Rebecca Hamilton. In the past, I was happy doing a detailed skeletal outline – meaning, expanded out to include as much as I could possibly think of – but without going into a chapter-by-chapter analysis. I found that by really having to sit and think about my overall story arc – meaning the inciting incident, the main climax, and the resolution, and sinking into it in a chapter-by-chapter synopsis for what would happen, I was able to still let my imagination take me where it wanted to go, but in a more succinct format and one that was more likely to not have hang-ups that would lead to writers block later on. In order to do this, you sit down and write 3-6 sentences about what the main goals and problems will be during that chapter or scene. Take an entire 2-4 hour block to jam out to some tunes and really think about this whole thing. If you want to write 60K words, plan to have roughly 2K words per chapter – so that’s about 30 chapters. Or at 3K words, it would be 20 chapters.

4. BONUS: Combo Skeletal and Flashlight Chapter-by-Chapter Outline – If sitting down for an afternoon doesn't sound like fun or isn't feasible, there is another way. You start out creating your skeletal outline with as much detail as you can muster for the overall story arc. Then, move into a flashlight chapter-by-chapter outline. Basically, this means using your skeletal outline to guide your arc, but before you write your next chapter, you brainstorm where the scene will take you BEFORE you start writing. So, for example – you write the skeletal outline with plot points. Figure out how many words per chapter and what you're aiming for as a final word count for the story. Once that's done, you write chapter one's outline synopsis. Then, write chapter one. Once you know how it played out versus your outline of it, you sit down and write chapter two's outline synopsis. Then write chapter two. And so on. Does that make sense?

Hopefully it does. I will also mention that in episode 12 we talked about mind maps and how they can be helpful for brainstorming your series creation. For the same reason, they can be used to help guide you with your outlines, too. Especially if you start feeling stuck. We also touched on it in last week's episode a bit when we talked about needing a project management tool. If you didn't catch those episodes, don't worry, I'll link to them in the show notes. The point is, outline is an incredibly important phase of your novel or series creation and it's not one that should be skipped. Even if you're a newbie. Please, learn from this once newbie, if you can.

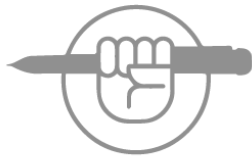
So, let's talk really quick about the major 3 Pros to Outlining Your Novel. Hopefully it will help drive home just why this phase can be so helpful.

1. Mastery of Your Story Arc – Remember when I said I spent three years floundering around wondering if I wrote Pendomus right? Three years. I wrote the book in under four months, but the rest of the time was spent tinkering with it to get it to adhere to some sort of a story flow. If you learn one thing from me, please let it be this. You don't have to spend so much time in indecision if you just take an afternoon to get clear on your arc before you start.

2. Clear Direction for Chapters/Scenes – If writing the next scene or chapter is hard for you, maybe you question your arc while you're writing and not like me, where that didn't happen until I came to the end. Then outlining means getting clear on your direction for your chapters and scenes before you even sit down to write them. Look, we're all better writers when we know what to write. If you sit me down and say, write a story, while I could probably do it, it would take me longer because I'd have to think about what to write about. Where if you say, write a story about a necromancer living in an ancestral home with tons of secrets – man, my imagination already goes to town. See what I'm saying? The more you give your imagination to work with, the easier the writing will be. Which leads nicely into the third pro to outlining.

3. Write Faster – If the goal is to make a career out of writing, you don't have time to lose putzing around because your ego says it doesn't want to be organized. Screw that. Your subconscious and imagination works best with constraints. As soon as you have those parameters in place and you know what your rules are, you'll surprise yourself with just how quickly you can write. And we're not talking about shit writing, either. We're talking well-thought out storylines that have mastered the art of storytelling. All because you put a little bit of time at the front end getting clear on your story. Why wouldn't you want that?

When it comes to all of this, there is literally only one tool you need to get started – and that's yourself. You must convince yourself that outlining your novel or series is time well spent and then sit down to do the work. You can literally do this with a piece of paper, a Google Doc, Excel Spreadsheet, or Scrivener. If you're at all like me, while you might bristle at the idea of outlining at first, deep down, you know there is truth in it. Publishing in our modern age isn't easy – but you can be 100% more effective when you know where you're going and why.



I am also in the process of creating a new self-assessment tool, chalk full of bonus goodies, to help you assess your story – whether you’ve already written it, but you don’t know if it’s working – or if you want to make sure you have all the pieces in place before you start writing. It’s called the Author Revolution Story Cure and it’ll be out in the next couple of weeks. Not only will it have clear details on the story archetypes, the 3 acts versus the 4 quarters, but there will also be help on understanding your genre, and a digital tool to help you outline. As soon as it’s ready to rock, you will be the first to know. I’ll also make sure to link to it in today’s show notes when it’s gone live.

Outlining has literally saved me months—maybe years—off of my writing and publishing time. It gives you a base-reference for story flow and helps guide you on your writing journey in a way that nothing and no one else can do for you. I’m sure we’ll touch on this subject more throughout the year, but for now, if you have questions, drop me a comment at our Author Revolution Facebook Page or if you’re a student, ask it in our Online Community. I’d be more than happy to help out. In the meantime, remember, you can head over to our show notes to get more details and links to everything we talked about today. Just head over to authorrevolution.org/16.

Well, there you have it, guys. I hope this podcast episode shed some light on why outlining is a lifesaver. Next week, I want to talk about another lifesaver... editorial calendars. Yes, I am a planner, so it means knowing not only how to write what comes next – but what to write next. Period. A lot of journalists and bloggers use editorial calendars, but we’re going to talk about why YOU need one, too. So, stay tuned.

One last thing before I leave. Have you subscribed to this podcast? Wherever you’ve found this podcast – Spotify, iTunes, or another location, it would mean the world to me if you follow along. Clicking the subscribe button literally takes a second, but it really does put a smile on my face.

Okay, that’s a wrap. Until next time. Go forth and be awesome.

