The Six Month Novel Writing Plan

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The Six-Month Novel Writing Plan

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Introduction

Most authors have heard of National Novel Writing Month, also known as NaNoWriMo, a novel writing challenge to write a 50,000 word novel during the month of November. Many famous authors, including John Green and Rainbow Rowell, have participated.

But for many writers who work full time, writing a novel in one month is difficult, if not impossible. Before I had a child or a full-time job, I completed NaNoWriMo twice.

Both times I participated in NaNoWriMo I really enjoyed the process, but I was forced to type at such a pace that both books required a great deal of copy and content editing. I made many typos per page, regularly contradicted myself, and filled the novels with many plot holes. After November, I never managed to make it very far past the first draft because of the amount of work required in terms of editing.

Now that I have a full-time job, a child, a husband, and any number of writing projects on the go, NaNoWriMo is unfeasible. But even if I had the time to do it, I am not sure it is the right challenge for me. It generates a lot of very raw material without giving the writer any time to edit. I thought I could write a much better novel if I had more time to edit as I wrote but still had a strict “must finish by” date.

I believe one of the enemies of novel writing is not having a strict deadline. If I spend too much time writing a novel I often forget most of
the details and plot that were covered in the beginning, so the start of the novel and the end do not merge. I then have to go back and edit large swaths of writing.

I have also noticed that writers who don't set deadlines for themselves often end up spending a lot more time working on their novels, and many never finish their novels at all. One of my friends just finished his first draft of his first novel – it took him ten years to write that first draft. Another friend has been writing for almost two decades and has yet to complete her novel.

Even if you don't end up following my plan or making your own plan, at least take this away from this book – create a deadline for yourself! It is important to stick to deadlines. Even famous authors with established fan bases struggle with this. George R.R. Martin, the author of *Game of Thrones*, is infamous for announcing when his next book is coming out and then delaying it by years.

I gave myself six months to write a novel and outlined a loose schedule – which appears later in this book. I was able to complete not just a first draft of the novel but also a second draft during that time. Only after the third draft was I able to come up with a name for it, *The Orphan Smugglers*. In just six months, I wrote a novel from scratch that I am very happy with.

*The Orphan Smugglers* is 63,000 words in length, which is much closer to the length of most published novels than NaNoWriMo's 50,000-word goal.

This book, *The Six-Month Novel-Writing Plan*, started out as an article, but
I received a great deal of positive feedback and so many questions about it, that I have expanded it into an eBook. While the initial article was just a modified version of this introduction and a very basic version of the plan itself, this eBook gives a more detailed plan and covers all sorts of important details that will help you execute the plan, such as: what you need to do before month one, tips for modifying the plan to suit your personal needs, and many more important pieces of information.

The Six-Month Novel-Writing Plan that lead to the creation of *The Orphan Smugglers* has already changed my life, even though the book hasn’t been published. The experience itself was so enjoyable and so productive that I could not be more grateful for it. It enabled me to be a parent and a writer. It allowed me to complete the most polished rough draft I have ever written. I really hope *The Six-Month Novel-Writing Plan* changes your life as well.
What You Need To Do Before Month One

Writing a novel can seem overwhelming. For some people, it really helps to do all the plotting and have a clear plan beforehand. When I started writing my novel I was not in that position. I didn’t really know where I was going, so I just started writing.

Honestly, I was in denial about writing a novel for the first week. Then I buckled down and made a plan, not just to be finished in six months’ time, but in terms of the plot of the novel itself. I figured out what the end would be and I just started writing toward it. It was scary at first, but it worked out.

I will tell you that if the six-month plan is for you, these are things you don’t have to figure out before starting your novel: the pitch, the title, the names of your secondary characters, all of your research. If you know those things – great, but you don’t need to at this point.

What you do need to know, and what this chapter covers is this: what your novel is, plotting your novel, starting a notes file, and making sure you have a plan.
What Your Novel Is

This is very important. You don’t need to know very much about your novel. As I admitted before, I certainly didn’t know much. But I did know a few things that were very helpful before writing the first page.

This is what I knew: the genre of the book (Young Adult), the number of main characters (three), the setting (Venice), and the main themes (family, smuggling, and coming of age).

How did I know these details? For a long time, I had been percolating an idea for a book about smugglers. I actually wrote one as a NaNoWriMo a decade ago, but it was a disorganized mess that I only remembered vaguely. My computer ate it over five years ago, so I could not even review the plot. But I knew that in the past decade I had grown as a writer and could now do the themes and idea justice.

It was easy for me to start, knowing only these things. It helped that I knew the genre, because I was able to picture my audience while writing. Knowing the genre also helped me figure out the approximate length of my book. Young adult novels are usually between fifty-five and ninety thousand words in length.

Adult fiction is usually more than seventy thousand and less than 115 thousand (although science fiction and fantasy tend to be on the lengthier end of this spectrum). Middle grade books are generally twenty to thirty thousand words, although they can be up to fifty thousand for older middle grade readers. Picture books tend to be less than 1000 words.
Knowing the number of main characters in my novel was important because of the way my book ended up being structured. Each chapter was narrated by one of the main characters and I rotated through them. This was also important because I had to develop each of these characters. So, each night as I was writing, I thought a little bit about one of the main characters. I spent a lot of time telling myself stories about the characters. Some of their stories didn’t make it into the book, but they helped me understand them better.

For example, I thought a lot about the first time one of the characters shoplifted with her friends, because even though it wasn’t part of the novel, it was part of what made her who she was. She only got away with the shoplifting because of her sharp tongue and quick wit, not her stealth.

The setting was important because of how it interacted with the main characters and the themes. Also, because the main setting of my book was Venice, a city I had not been to for years, it required a bit of additional research that I did while writing the novel.

The main themes were important because they helped me come up with a plot. I knew what ideas I wanted to explore and I hunted around for a plot that would work well with those ideas.

Now, you can have a lot more or a lot less figured out about your novel than I did before you begin writing, but you have to start with something. Hunting for an idea while writing your novel can push your schedule to a lot longer than six months, so you want at least the bare bones before you get started.
Plotting Your Novel

“I often said that writers are of two types.

There is the architect, which is one type. The architect, as if designing a building, lays out the entire novel. He knows how many rooms there will be and what the roof will be made of or how high it will be, or where the plumbing will run and where the electrical outlets will be in its room. All that before he drives the first nail. Everything is there in the blueprint.

And then there's the gardener who digs the hole in the ground, puts in the seed and waters it with his blood and sees what comes up. The gardener knows certain things. He's not completely ignorant. He knows whether he planted an oak tree, or corn, or a cauliflower. He has some idea of the shape but a lot of it depends on the wind and the weather and how much blood he gives it and so forth.

No one is purely an architect or a gardener in terms of a writer, but many writers tend to one side or the other. I'm very much more a gardener.”

– George R.R. Martin

George R.R. Martin is onto something here. There are people who like to plan, who sometimes spend just as much time planning as they do actually writing the novel. Then there are authors who just write with a loose vision for what they want to see on the page.
I fall into the gardener school. I have tried outlining novels, but my major vice is ignoring that outline completely, even if it appears to be very good and concrete. Usually when I get to the act of typing I want to be surprised by characters to a certain degree, which is not possible when I have a strict plan.

But some people need to plot a novel; they find it comforting, even if they don’t follow it entirely. With the gardener approach, you still need to have some sort of idea of what you want to end up with.

Next, I am going to go over four different approaches to plotting your novel. You can follow all four if you are not sure which one works for you. Or you can just follow the one that appeals the most to you.

**Gardener**

This is how I plot a novel. I come up with a situation that sounds interesting to me. Sometimes I start out with a setting, sometimes with the larger context.

With *The Orphan Smugglers*, I knew I wanted to write about a hypothetical war in contemporary Europe. I wanted the setting to be in Venice, and the main characters were going to be a female smuggler and her two English teenage cousins.

I wrote down the names of the three major characters. Then I figured out what I wanted out of the story. What were my major themes? I wanted the themes to be family, smuggling, and coming of age. By identifying my themes, I was able to narrow down my plot. I also figured, given the
setting and my interpretation of the themes, that the end would involve an international rescue.

Then I started to write. Until I was writing the last 20 percent or so of the novel, I didn’t know how the international rescue would work or even who they would be rescuing, but once I got there, the answer presented itself. It was important to know what the ending was – loosely speaking – because then I was working toward a clear finish line. If I didn’t know the end from the start, I would have probably needed to edit a lot more after the first draft.

The story itself would have felt more unfocused, because in my head the story of the characters extended past the novel itself. I agree with Frank Herbert, who said, “There is no real ending. It’s just the place where you stop the story.”

For me, this is the easiest and most intuitive way to write. It is also the most exciting. Night after night, I could not wait to write so that I could find out what was going to happen. Sure, I knew the ending, but I was excited to see how my characters would get there.

The Gardener Who Dabbles In Architecture

If you are someone who needs a more concrete plan before proceeding but still wants to have the excitement of finding out new things, this option might work the best for you.

First, follow all the steps outlined in the Gardener.
Then, before proceeding, really flesh out the characters. You can do this in a number of ways. One is by writing down a few pages about each of the main characters. You can just include whatever information you think of, or you can fill out a questionnaire, like the one below.

**Character Sketch Questionnaire**

- Full Name:
- Height:
- Weight:
- Age:
- Hair Color:
- Distinguishing Features:
- Tattoos/Scars:
- Hometown:
- Current City:
- Education:
- Relationship Status:
- Siblings:
- Favorite Food:
- Favorite Book:
- Favorite Word:
- Favorite Movie:
- Favorite Childhood Memory:
- Pet Peeves:
- Hobbies:
- Medical Issues:
You can also do more research regarding the setting. But all this is just to create a good starting point. The idea is not to figure out the plot, but to create a steady foundation (or good soil).

**The Architect With A Nice Garden**

If the idea of plotting really appeals to you – go for it! But limit yourself. Most complete synopses that publishers request are limited to a page or two for a reason.

You can be traditional about it and think of the plot in terms of a plot diagram. The initial flat line of exposition, followed by the angled line of climax, followed by the almost straight line of falling action that ends in the flat line of resolution.

However, the novels I like to read – and also the ones I write – have plot diagrams that more closely mimic a mountain range. Plot diagrams are not exactly helpful there.

What I would do with a plot that contains a series of climaxes is to first write down the top five to ten most important events as a series of bullet points, then turn the bullet points into a paragraph format.

The other thing you could do is just create a plot diagram (or two) for every character. One of the most important things to keep in mind while navigating the plot is to make sure that your characters develop (at least the main ones) through the events that take place.

That is why it is important, even if you have a series of bullet-pointed events, to turn that list into paragraphs.
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I think the key to this kind of plotting – the kind where you know the beginning, the middle, and the end, and how it will affect the characters – is to not spend too much time on it. If you have a few niggling doubts or gray areas, don't worry about them. Start writing. That is the priority, after all.

The Architect

Not only am I not an architect, I can't claim to understand them entirely. I am in awe of them, but I don't generally enjoy reading their work. The best example of architect I can think of is J.R.R. Tolkien, and lots of people love reading his work.

I think the key to being an architect is to spend a very long time and a lot of effort not just thinking about what you are going to write, but taking notes, working on an extensive plot outline, drawing pictures, even creating a language.

Don't rush being an architect—draw a world map if you need to. Write as many notes about the plot as you can. Make sure to keep everything in order so that it doesn’t overwhelm you. Spend a long time getting into each of your main character’s heads. Write short stories about them that take place before the novel does so that you can better understand where they come from.

Do any research you need to do in advance. Because you have a detailed plot line, most things that you need to know in terms of research you should be figured out before starting the actual novel.
Everyone has their own approach to writing and to plotting. I don't think there is a right or a wrong way. Your personality, the genre you are writing, length of work, and intended audience all play a role in what kind of plotting works for you.

Also, what works for you one time might not the next.

The most important thing for me is that plotting is not writing. This is a stage you have to get through, before you get to the act of writing. You can be a gardener or an architect, just make sure you eventually start to write the novel.

Start A Notes File

When I started my book, I also started another file on the computer, named Notes. In that file, I wrote the name of the neighborhood in Venice that the main characters lived in. Also, because I have a terrible memory for names, I wrote down the full names of the three main characters.

As I was writing the book, the notes file got longer and longer. Secondary characters’ names were written there, along with a few words about their context, and all sorts of information that I would need to keep consistent throughout the book.

My notes file doesn’t look pretty. It isn’t well organized, but it is helpful to return to time and time again.

Making Sure You Have a Plan
Don’t just assume my six-month plan will work for you. Review it, then read the chapter on modification tips, and then write out a whole plan for yourself.

Your plan might look very similar to mine, or it could look very different. It depends on how you write and what your life is like right now.

If you are someone who uses a calendar or a planner, write down the daily plan in your calendar. This step is particularly helpful if you already have a vacation, work trip, or holiday planned during that six-month period. This will encourage you to take that event (or events) into consideration in your plan. It might make sense to write two hours a day for a week so that you can actually enjoy that vacation in Jamaica (for example).

If you are not someone who uses a calendar, digital or otherwise, it is still helpful to write out the whole plan and put it up some place where it is unavoidable - sticking it to the fridge is a good option. Make sure, no matter what, that you take holidays or visitors into consideration. Right now you might think that you will have plenty of time to write during that family reunion, but once it starts, reality sets in.

I always like to be a little ahead of schedule, just in case, but then I was the kind of student who finished my final essays two weeks early. Not everyone operates that way. Not everyone should.

It is particularly important not to have false starts to the plan. For that reason, please read this entire book thoroughly before beginning. If you have false starts to the plan, this can really throw the timeline off and can cause you to jeopardize the novel itself.
I would much rather that you fall behind schedule and work hard to catch up than fall behind schedule and give up, or extend the plan an extra month. Once you start the plan and extend the deadline, the deadline itself will seem movable and less important. You want to take that deadline seriously, for the sake of your novel.
My Six-Month Plan

You don't have to follow my novel plan completely. As I stated earlier, I ended up deviating from it myself by finishing in four months and using the additional time to edit.

If you do follow my plan, feel free to modify it. For example, make sure you account for any big vacation, holiday, or work project scheduled during that period. Check in with your plan every month to be sure you are on schedule.

Once you start the plan, the most important thing is to keep going. If you stop or change the deadline once you have started, you will alter the strength of the plan.

This chapter focuses on my plan and the template plan for the project. The next chapter will help you to modify the plan to fit your needs and your schedule.
Month One:

*Write One Hour A Day Every Day*

I wrote for at least an hour every day during month one. Weekdays or weekends, it didn't matter, I was writing. I chose a specific time (right after my daughter fell asleep at night) but if your schedule is more variable, you can be flexible. Don’t assume time for writing will just present itself to you. You have to make the time to write.

If you are a few days into the plan and struggling to write for an hour every day, start being stricter with yourself. Every morning, make sure you pick a time that day when you can focus exclusively on writing. Then actually follow through.

During my writing time, I do not do anything else. Planning is not writing. Research is not writing. Editing is not writing. Using Facebook is definitely not writing. Only writing should count as writing. I do take notes in my note-making file during writing time, but only when it is important. As an exception, I allow myself to revise sections during the writing time, as most of my revising is rewriting.

Unlike with NaNoWriMo, the goal was not to write as fast as I could type, but to write as best as I could. So if I had to really slow down and think about sections while writing, I did that. If I had to go back and rewrite sections that I had just written because they didn’t work out the first time, I did that.

The idea was that by spending my time writing slowly and deliberately, I would greatly decrease the amount of time I would have to spend editing
and revising later. Most of the time I managed to write about five pages a day, and that was without rushing myself.

Two-Hour Editing Binges Once A Week
Once a week, I would make sure to do a two-hour editing binge. Instead of writing new material, I went over what I had written so far and edited it a little, just to make sure the storyline and character development were as cohesive as possible.

This also helped me catch a lot of annoying little mistakes. It also meant that my first draft was much more polished than anything I had ever written before. During my second draft, I could focus on characterization and other major issues, instead of fixing spelling errors and little inconsistencies.

I did not allow myself to edit during the hour set aside each day, as that would eat into writing time, and I think editing as you go interferes with the flow of writing. I did use my notes file a lot while editing to make sure that everything was consistent.

Read for Research
I think it is very important to read as part of the plan. It is very important to read works (not every day, but at least every week) that relate to what you are writing, either in terms of direct research or in terms of a similar genre.

For example, I was struggling writing the action sequences in my book. Then I remembered a book I had read as a teenager that had compelling
action scenes. I reread that book and it really helped me write the action-oriented sections of the book in a more compelling way.

I reread a number of my favorite YA novels and a mystery novel that was set in Venice. It was very helpful for me to read these novels, particularly in terms of pacing, phrasing, and setting.

I also read a number of nonfiction books about Venice. One of the tricky things about the setting being somewhere that I don’t live is really capturing the feeling of it. So I spent a lot of time learning more about Venice, a city I visited a long time ago.

In addition, I did some research pertaining to refugees, because that is a theme throughout the book. I did some reading on that, but I confess I found listening to podcasts and interviews while I walked far more engaging than reading.

About half the books I read were in the same genre I was writing in and the other half were for research about the setting. I felt like this was a good balance for the sort of writing I was doing.

If you don’t have the time to read, try audiobooks. Libraries have them and there are lots of resources online. Also, as I mentioned before, podcasts are free and can be very helpful.
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It almost goes without saying, but I will say it just in case: Reading time should never count as writing time.
Month Two:

• **Write One Hour a Day Every Day**
Increase the amount of time you are writing each day to two hours if you have not reached at least fifty pages.

• **One Two-Hour Editing Period Once a Week**

• **Workshop the First Chapter**
A writing workshop is when a group of writers read and provide feedback on your work. The first chapter is the most important, because it is your first impression not only to readers but to editors and publishers. It was helpful getting feedback on the first chapter because it helped motivate me to finish the book. It also helped me figure out a thing or two about pacing and tone.

A lot of libraries and independent bookstores host workshops. If you can’t find one that works with your schedule, you can always send the first chapter to a couple of friends and get their feedback. Or you can find an online workshop.

It is really important to start getting feedback at this time. Even if you just read the first two or three pages to a few friends and then listen to what they have to say. Feedback can really help you stay motivated.
Month Three:

• *Write One Hour a Day Every Day*

If you are not at least at 100 pages at the beginning of this month, you should write for at least two hours most days.

• *One Two-Hour Editing Period Once a Week*
Month Four:

• *Take a Week Off*

Read, but don't write. You will come back stronger. Even if you are behind you should take this break. Writing during a compressed period is a little bit like training for a marathon. If you don’t take a break your muscles are more likely to fatigue and you are much more likely to perform poorly or get injured. Writing injuries are different from running injuries but they both can prevent you from reaching your goal.

• *After the Off Week, Write One Hour A Day Every Day*

If you are not at least 150 pages at the start of this month, you should write for two hours most days.

• *One Two-Hour Editing Period Once a Week*

Don't edit on the week off.
Month Five:

• **Write One Hour a Day Every Day**
  If you are not at least at 200 pages at the beginning of this month, you should write for at least two hours most days.

• **One Two-Hour Editing Period Once a Week**

  *Note:* During this month I finished my novel, which is over 250 pages. I then took two weeks off. I did not take the week off the previous month because I realized I was going to finish early.
Month Six:

• Write One Hour a Day Every Day
If you are not at least at 250 pages at the start of this month, you should write for two hours most days. This plan is clearly for longer novels, as mine was already finished at this point.

• One Two-Hour Editing Period Once a Week
I spent all of this month working on the second draft, which I was able to complete before the end of the sixth month. I often would spend two hours a day editing.
Additional Information:

I wanted to give myself flexibility with my plan. So when I say write every day, that is the ideal but not always the reality. Some days my daughter was sick. Some days we had unexpected guests. Even with setbacks, I ended up almost two months ahead of schedule. After a two-week break, I went back and edited the first draft, finishing my second draft right before the six months were up.

Part of the reason I ended up ahead of schedule was the fact that I really love writing novels. If I had more than one hour to spare during a day, I spent that extra time writing too. I would say that about half the days that I was able to write, I wrote for at least an hour and a half.

Throughout the six-month period, I kept updating my note file to make sure it reflected what was going on in my book. The smugglers that I wrote about visited a number of European cities repeatedly on smuggling runs and I had to make sure those cities were always called the same thing (for example). The notes were extremely helpful, not just in terms of writing, but when it came time to edit it was good to consult that file.
Guidelines For Modifying The Plan

The plan should work for you. That is my number one priority. In order for the plan to work for you, you may have to modify it first.

Below are my tips for modifying the plan so that it will work for you.

1. **Make sure the plan is realistic for you.**
   Just because the plan sounds great, doesn’t mean you are ready to do it. I think it is important to be prepared to start it and not have a number of false starts. Once you start, stick with it. That might mean waiting for the right time of year to start, it might mean starting right now. It might mean stretching the plan out to nine months, or it might mean concentrating it into three months so you can start school after it is finished. It is up to you. The minute you start writing it stops being my plan and starts being yours. Feel free to modify it a little once you start, but not too much. Just like laws that are not enforced are not taken seriously, a plan without structure isn’t a helpful one.

2. **If you alter the time involved in the plan, don’t do it dramatically.**
   In order for the plan to work it should not be too long or too short. If you think writing a book in a month is a better fit for you, that is why NaNoWriMo (and camp NaNoWriMo) exist. If you want to take more than a year to write a novel, then you don’t need this book either. I think any modifications of the plan that involve it taking three months to a year are fine. If your job and social life
keep you very busy, one half-hour writing period a day could be a lot to pull off every day. Remember the time goal is for your benefit, so you will be able to complete your novel in six months.

3. **Make sure to include editing time.**

   I urge you not to eliminate the weekly editing time. You could decrease it to an hour, but don’t eliminate it completely. That editing time means that the first draft will be much stronger and more coherent. It helped me going forward in the book, because I knew I had a strong, relatively edited foundation to build on.

4. **Don’t eliminate reading.**

   Many writers are naturally big readers, but that doesn’t have to be the case. A friend of mine who is a professor has commented on the fact that more and more of her students don’t read outside of school. I have noticed that trend as well. If you are naturally inclined to not read much, it is even more important to read during this period. If you are not familiar with the genre you are writing in, this is a good time to brush up. One of my former students once turned in a poorly written rip-off of *The Lord of the Rings* because she didn’t realize it was a book before it was a movie. Knowing the conventions of your genre are important, even if you are not following them.

   But don’t be too ambitious. If you are a slow reader, don’t commit to reading ten books during this period. Have reasonable expectations. Also, make sure you budget time for reading. If you have a commute that involves mass transit, I highly recommend
reading during that period. If you need to listen to audiobooks instead of reading, that works too.
How To Get The Most Out Of The Six-Month Novel-Writing Plan

I assume that the plan will work differently for everyone who participates in it, but below are some of the suggestions I have for getting the most out of your six-month time investment. The suggestions are in no particular order.

Don’t Skimp On The Editing

It can be really tempting to not edit each week. Particularly if you don’t like editing. But think about it this way – you are doing work now, so that you do not have to do it later. Incrementally, you are doing work that otherwise you would have to do all at once. I found that I learned a lot about what to do (and what not to do) by editing the earlier section of a book while I wrote the later sections.

Editing and revising as I went and focusing on the first half of the book really helped keep the book cohesive. It also helped eliminate a lot of continuity errors.

Overall, editing as I went was so important because I ended up with a very polished first draft that was easy to edit for character development and other overarching issues. For previous projects, when I didn’t edit as I
went, the first chapter or two turned out fine but the rest of the manuscript was a mound of error upon error. Only a few of my manuscripts have made it beyond the first draft because of that. Editing as I went really changed everything. The overall process of editing was more pleasant because it was interspersed with writing.

Don’t Edit While You Write

I mean two things by this. First, don’t count editing time toward writing time (or vice versa). Second, don’t edit the chapter while you write it. It is much better to edit a chapter that you have completed than the one you are currently working on. It is important to get the words out, chapter by chapter, and then refine them.

Read

I mentioned this twice earlier, but I don’t think I can stress this enough. Stephen King phrased it best when he said, “If you don't have time to read, you don't have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that.” This is particularly true when writing a novel. Don’t read so that you can mimic the authors whose books you are reading, read so that you can learn from both their successes and their failures.

I do think it is particularly important while writing to be selective about what you are reading. I will often force myself to finish books I don’t like, just because I started them. Doing this is not worth it, particularly while writing, because those authors’ words might impact your writing in a negative way.
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Make Sure To Take A Break

Writing is important, but sometimes you do need to take breaks. If you do end up editing the second draft during the six-month time period, please take at least a week break between drafts, preferably two.

This is really important, because it will allow you time to obtain a clearer perspective on the piece, but also because, as with anything this intense, you really need a break. The second situation in which you should take a break is if at any point you hit a wall. Sometimes you can write through a wall, and do try to, but only for an hour or so. If you can’t, take a couple of days off, do something to refresh yourself and then return to the writing.

Feel Free To Backtrack

Writing might seem like a straight line – you start from nothing and create something – but sometimes you have to go back in order to go forward. Halfway through my novel, two of my characters ended up kissing. These characters were going to end up together at the end of the book, so I thought it was fine - they just ended up getting (back) together earlier than I thought they would. I kept writing forward from that point.

But the writing process grew harder and slower, the further I got away from that kiss. That was when I realized that I had made a mistake. That kiss between those two characters, at that point in time, just wasn’t natural. It did not make sense at that point in their relationship. If they
were real people, they wouldn’t have kissed. Not only did I have to change that scene, I had to change a lot of what came after it, because some of it involved fallout from that one kiss.

The minute I backtracked (and deleted all that time-consuming writing) it was very easy for me to write again. I quickly wrote what followed, instead of slowly struggling forward.

By doing this I was able to avoid needing to do major revisions later, when it would have been a lot more time consuming and complicated.

**Talk About It**

I am lucky. My husband is a writer also, and while he might get bored, he usually lets me ramble on about my book as much as I want (just as long as there are not too many spoilers). I think it is really important to talk about the book while writing it, not necessarily the plot details, but the general lines of the novel. You are much more likely to get encouragement and feedback this way.

Sometimes I even figured out something new about my own book by talking about it. Talking about it with strangers helped me figure out what angle to pitch the book at to editors and agents. It helped me figure out what element of the plot appealed to most people. Knowing those things encouraged me to revise the book in a way that put more of the attention on the parts of the plot that were most engaging to people.
Don’t Overbook Yourself

Several times while I was writing the novel I turned down friends’ invitations to go out, and when they asked what I was busy doing, I told them I was writing a novel. One friend got rather upset. But it was so important for me to preserve that writing time. J.K. Rowling has one of my favorite quotes about this situation:

“Be ruthless about protecting writing days, i.e., do not cave in to endless requests to have ‘essential’ and ‘long overdue’ meetings on those days. The funny thing is that, although writing has been my actual job for several years now, I still seem to have to fight for time in which to do it. Some people do not seem to grasp that I still have to sit down in peace and write the books, apparently believing that they pop up like mushrooms without my connivance.”

If J.K. Rowling, one of the most successful writers of all-time, has to defend her writing time, I imagine that all writers have to. I also took a break from volunteering in order to finish the book. I felt bad about it, but in the long run it was a rather small break.

Build In Bonuses

Your bonuses are going to be different than mine, but the principle remains the same: you offer yourself some incentive for reaching certain word counts by certain points. Even if your reward is just a glass of wine
or a chocolate bar at the end of each week that you meet your goals, bonuses can help you keep on track.

In fact, if I stayed on track with my writing, once a month I allowed myself the luxury of writing in a bar that served excellent food. Many of the professors at the local university graded their work there. They did this for a good reason, the atmosphere was very relaxing and much better than the local coffee shops. I would drink a glass of wine, eat a fancy sandwich, and write while it was still light out (did I mention that this bar had a view?). For a mother who usually writes at the kitchen table with a glass of water after her daughter goes to bed at night, this was very luxurious.

Be Accountable

Some people need to be held more accountable than others. I liked it when people occasionally asked me how my novel was going. That was more than enough to keep me on track. But everyone is different.

A group of my writer friends have gotten together to be more accountable. They send an email to each other broadcasting their writing goals. Then, if one of them doesn’t reach their goal that person owes all the others a favor. The favor is agreed upon in advance and it tends to be something like a home-cooked meal or an hour of gardening.

This can really help motivate you. You might even get a free meal out of it, if you meet your goals and others do not.
Other friends of mine find it very helpful to post their goals and updates on Facebook for everyone to see. They get a lot of encouragement that way, at least when they first post about it. No one keeps them accountable to their goals on Facebook.

Write Regularly

The only way one can complete a challenge like this one and produce a good book is by writing regularly. If you just write a hundred pages over a week, and then take a very long break before returning for another hundred-page push, that will generate a lot of rushed writing. It won’t be very different than taking part in NaNoWriMo.

When I took more than a three-day break that wasn’t an official break or vacation between focused writing times because I was too busy with my real job, I found that it took me a lot longer to warm up and write well. When you make writing a habit and are writing consistently, it is a lot easier to produce.

Find A Good Copy Editor

I have tried to find a good copy editor for years, and for a while I had one that I was happy with, but I realized they were missing too much. Then a year ago at Authors Publish, we started working with a copy editor who did a great job. One whose skills surpassed all the others we had used before. She still makes mistakes, of course, but far fewer than others we
hired in the past. Even *The New Yorker* regularly publishes typos and they are famed for their copyediting.

My new copy editor kept me realistic. If I had six characters buckling seatbelts in a car that only had five seats she would call me out on it. The same goes for pacing issues and lack of descriptions. She helped improve the novel I was writing previously dramatically.

When I first started *The Orphan Smugglers*, her voice was in my head. If I introduced a character without describing them, I heard her. If I switched tenses, I heard her. It was wonderful. It was also really motivating to know that when I finished writing she would be able to copy edit so that I could quickly start submitting to publishers.

Not everyone can afford copy editing, but there are free options out there, such as exchanging editing services with another author.
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Editing Past The First Draft

“Nobody cares about your first draft.”
– Neil Gaiman

“Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you and a shitty first draft.”
– Anne Lamott

As you probably figured out already, I am hoping that your first draft is not going to be a complete mess, at least in terms of copy editing – that is, after all, the main purpose behind the strategy of editing as you go.

I also revised as part of writing. If a certain part wasn’t working I tried to tackle it as soon as I could, instead of waiting to go back and change it after the book was finished. I wasn’t sure if that would work while I was doing it, but I think it was the number one reason that my book did not require extensive revisions.

I was expecting feedback from readers that recommended large changes to the novel. That has happened every other time I have written a novel. This time, all the feedback regarded smaller changes. Although some of the changes did still involve a fair amount of work.

My major critique of NaNoWriMo is that copy editing and revising is discouraged as you go. If editing as you go is done right, you end up with
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a much stronger first draft that is easier to transform into a published manuscript.

For example, when I last wrote a NaNoWriMo novel I spent over six months just editing and it is nowhere near being finished; the facts of the book contradict themselves, the plot is a poorly paced mess, and a lot more copy editing is required.

This time, I edited from start to finish. I had two major focuses: plot continuity and character integrity. Most of the minor copy editing mistakes that I could spot were fixed during the weekly editing sessions, so I was able to really focus in on what mattered.

If there was an editing issue that did not fall into those two categories, I dealt with it, but my attention was focused on those two categories and I rarely noticed anything outside of those filters.

When I edited for plot continuity I was very aware where the weaknesses in my book lay at that point. The book I wrote took place in a slightly altered version of our reality, where present day Europe is at war. When I started the book I was not sure why this war was being fought, or who exactly was fighting in it.

By the end of the book I knew exactly what was going on, but the start did not match the ending, so my first task was to align those facts. Then I went through page by page looking for any discrepancies.

The same was true for characters. Two of my three main characters came to me rather easily. I could picture them as complete human beings, with
flaws and gifts. The third main character was the hardest for me to write. So a lot of the effort of editing the characters went into making her character more cohesive and more likable.

I also had to put a fair amount of editing effort into the minor characters, to make sure that they stayed consistent throughout. Usually when I introduced a minor character I had no idea what role they would play later on. So sometimes I had to adjust their introduction to better reflect their behavior as a whole.

I managed to complete both the first and second drafts within a six-month period. I finished my second draft two days before the end of that period. Right after I finished the second draft, I gave a copy to my husband. For the record, it took about two weeks (with gentle encouragement) for him to read it.

After that it was ready for someone else to read it, so that I could get feedback. In the past, I usually needed to edit a manuscript twice more before it was readable for someone else. Granted, that first reader was my husband, but the point is that after he finished reading the novel he had three main complaints. That was it. None of those complaints required dramatic changes, just a few minor edits.

After I received feedback from my husband, I started the third draft. His main issue was with the pacing of the first forty pages of the book. As you may know, the first section of the book is very important from a publishing standpoint. When you query agents or publishers you do so with the first twenty pages or so, and they accept or reject your work based on them. In
addition, most readers will give your book a try for a couple of pages. If they aren’t drawn in, they won’t read more.

I knew I had to change the first section so that it was more engaging. I edited every bit of extraneous text out of it, per his advice. Any word or sentence that didn’t serve a purpose was eradicated. I also put more emphasis on the conflict between two of the characters.

I edited the end a little, but for the third draft most of my focus was on the beginning. I also put effort into strengthening the sense of place in the novel, based on the feedback.

Currently, the manuscript is out at my copy editor. Hopefully, based on her feedback, the fourth draft will be finished in a month and the manuscript as a whole will be ready to submit.

Some writers, C.S. Lewis was one of them, Byron another, write one draft and they are done. Their first drafts are that polished. Most writers have a minimum of three drafts. If this is your first or second novel, I would suggest doing at least three drafts, but make sure you get feedback after the second draft. And do not be surprised if it takes you up to six drafts. If you are serious about improving and crafting a better novel, that is what it might take.

Not all drafts need to happen before you start submitting though. For instance, perhaps on draft three you can start submitting. Then if you get feedback that additional edits or revisions are needed you can go back and do those.
When I am deep in the middle of editing I always think of my favorite quote by Mable E. Wetherbee and try to take her approach: “Going back and editing is the best part of writing; it’s like reading an interactive novel. ‘Oh I wish the author used this word here or had this dramatic reveal there…oh that’s right! I am the author!’”

My General Tips For Editing

Always correct a mistake when you see it. You might think that you will remember it later, but that is often not the case.

Read out loud. Reading out loud can help you catch mistakes that you would not otherwise. It is even better if you listen while someone else reads it out loud. You can also get a free app to read it out loud for you. NaturalReader Text to Speech works well for me. This can be difficult to do with a novel-length work, so you could just do this with the first twenty pages or so.

Focus on different aspects of your novel in different drafts. By focusing on one aspect of the story, setting, characters, or plot with each draft you can do a much better job and spend far less time.

Get feedback. I cannot stress this enough; even if it is just a friend or family member, get someone to read the book and offer concrete feedback. What I mean by concrete feedback is that your reader doesn’t just praise the book as a whole, but focuses on specifics in the book. Do they love one of the characters in the book? Great! Is another just a complete waste of space? That is good to know. If you don’t know anyone to read for you,
you can almost always find a beta reader online (just google beta reader for some starting points).

**Hire a good copy editor.** One of the big revelations for me was when I hired a good copy editor. Not only did she really improve the final product, but reading her feedback and corrections made me much more aware of the mistakes I commonly make.

**Don’t rush it.** Take time off between drafts. If the editing process does not seem to be going anywhere, take a break for a couple days. It is important to come back stronger, and avoid getting so frustrated that you just quit.

**Don’t overwork it.** Once your manuscript has been professionally copyedited, start submitting it. If you get a round of rejections (at least ten) consider reworking it at that point (particularly if you get feedback in that direction).

**Use technology to your advantage.** Particularly for copy editing. These two apps both really reduce time spent copy editing:

**Hemingway App.** This app is a great tool that will help identify long sentences, passive voice, overly complex words, and adverb reduction. It tightens up your writing.

**ProWritingAid.** This app can find everything that Hemingway App didn’t. It focuses in on clichés, sticky sentences, and overused words.

**Find a beta reader or three.** A beta reader isn’t a copy editor. They are avid readers who provide feedback to new authors for free. The feedback they provide focuses on content, not mistakes. The more specific questions
you ask of them, generally the better feedback you get. You can find beta readers lots of places, including this Goodreads group and this Tumblr group.
How To Prepare To Submit

Now that you have finished your first draft, or second, or sixth, what do you need to do to get your book ready to publish? If you are planning to traditionally publish your book, this chapter is key. If you are self-publishing, not all of the following will steps apply to you, but many do.

Title

All of my earlier novels had titles before I even started writing them. Usually, titles come very easily to me. It was difficult to find a title for my most recent book. However, I am very happy with the title I ended up with: *The Orphan Smuggler*.

I am also glad I struggled with a title. Because that meant I was able to come up with a new strategy for title creation – actually, more than one.

The first strategy I had was to write down all the words that I associated with the book. Words like war, family, bomb, smugglers, Venice, nerds, Europe, orphans, etc. Then I started to play with grouping those words into titles.

Once I had five titles I liked I put them in a document together. I returned to this document every day and removed one of the titles (not deleting it forever, just in case I changed my mind). After four days, I was left with one title: *The War and Everything*. 
My second strategy was to get everyone who read all or part of the book to offer up a potential title or two. I wrote those down, and then chose from that group. That is how I ended up with the title *The Orphan Smuggler*.

**Pitch**

If you ever meet with an agent, a pitch is what they will want from you. It is something you should include in any query letter you send out, as well. It also has a secondary purpose. Whenever anyone – a friend, mother-in-law, or a complete stranger – asks about your book, you will have a clear, easy answer. A pitch is also the key component of #PitMad, and other Twitter based pitch fests that in the last few years have become one of the ways to find an agent or a publisher.

A pitch is an attempt to make the main concept of your novel appealing in one or two sentences. Once you are happy with your pitch, memorize it.

The pitch should never be a rhetorical question. Agents and publishers see rhetorical pitches all the time and are often biased against them. In my experience reading rhetorical questions as pitches, I would have to agree with them.

I have, with her permission, included an excerpt of Emily Harstone’s article, *How to Write A Good Pitch For Your Novel*. I used the strategies she outlines below to come up with a good pitch for *The Orphan Smuggler*.

“Write a Lot of Pitches”
This seems obvious, but it isn't necessarily. You should start writing pitches as often as possible if you are interested in following the path of publishing that involves agents. Even traditional publishers often require pitches, so if you are submitting to publishers directly it's not a bad thing to practice.

When you watch a movie, write a couple of pitches for it afterwards. Also sit down with your own novel and just write pitches for fifteen minutes. Don't look at these pitches right away. Give it a few days then review them. Once you have done this a few times you should have three or four pitches that you like.

**Play with Length**

Try writing longer pitches occasionally and then think of ways that you can trim them down to size.

**Play with Focus**

A novel has a lot of different things going on at the same time. There can be many themes and plots. Don't try to cover all of it in the pitch. Instead try focusing on just one theme, plot, or character.

**Compare**

This sounds like a cheap trick but almost every agent I have ever met wants to compare your book to already successful books. For example, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is the erotic version of *Twilight*, but without vampires. Agents want to know what your book is like, so saying something like "*The Matrix* with aliens, not robots" might intrigue someone.

**Get Feedback**
Take the few pitches you really like and then show them to people - friends and family members that you trust. Some should have read the novel already, others should not have. Their feedback will be valuable as you develop your ability to write a good pitch.”

I tried all of those strategies, and while I am not a hundred percent happy with my final result, and I am still tweaking my pitch and attempting new ones, I have one that I am ready to show publishers and agents, which is a good place to start.

My tentative pitch: “A Venetian smuggler takes in her two British cousins after their parents are killed by a subway bomber.”

**Query Letter**

A query letter is a single page cover letter introducing your book; both publishers open to unsolicited submissions and literary agents require them. A literary agent is someone who will act on your behalf, dealing with publishers and promoting the author’s work.

This letter should be professional, and the tone formal.

Your query letter should have the pitch in it very early on. It is the second sentence of mine. The first? “I am submitting a portion of my young adult novel, *The Orphan Smuggler*, for your consideration.” It is important to mention the genre of your book as quickly as possible.
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The rest of the first or second paragraph of the query letter should focus on providing a mini synopsis of the book. This was the hardest part for me, but I found it very helpful to read the backs of books I enjoyed for inspiration. Some publishers and agents explicitly ask for you to reveal the ending in the synopsis, but many do not. The important thing is to not get bogged down by details. Writing a really long synopsis and submitting it as one paragraph does not make anyone happy.

Next, it is important to give some personal information, if you feel like it is relevant. For example, if you have never published before but your novel is about a young chef at a Michelin two-star restaurant who solves mysteries, and you just happen to be a young chef at a two-star restaurant (sans mysteries) that is a good fact to bring up in your query letter.

Now, I am not a smuggler – I am not even Italian – but I do have an extensive history of publication in an unrelated genre (poetry) and I do have a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing. So that is what I focused on in my query letter.

Most agents are looking for a query letter that contains all the information that I described above. Most publishers ask for additional information. They usually mention specifically what they are looking for on their website. Some publishers want to know of three books similar to yours that have been published in your genre in the last five years. Some want a general marketing plan. Some want a very specific marketing plan. It really depends on the publisher.
Read all of their guidelines thoroughly before submitting. You don’t want your work to be dismissed unread just because you did not read the guidelines carefully enough.

I am currently on draft two of my query letter. Who knows how many drafts I will go through before I write the one that results in a book contract, but I am glad to have started the process.
In Conclusion

Writing a novel in six months isn’t for everyone, the same way that NaNoWriMo isn’t for everyone. But for me, having the time constraints of this plan was incredibly motivating and helpful.

I think my novel is much better because it was written in this period of time. I had enough time to edit as I went, but I also didn’t have so much time that I lost my very concentrated focus on the novel. The novel felt tight and complete after the six months because of the focused time I was able to give it.

When you write a novel over a year, years, or even a decade, you are often writing from a very different perspective, because one changes and grows over time. Because of that, novels that take a longer time to write often can seem inconsistent, or the characters within them may seem that way. The author’s interests also change, and that can alter the themes of the novel.

*The Six-Month Novel-Writing Plan* made it possible for me to write a novel, when I had almost given up on that part of my life. Not only that, but the novel I wrote came out much closer to publishable than I ever imagined possible.

I encourage you to try the plan. Hopefully this book will help you adjust the plan to maximize your chances of success. If you try it, send me an email – at the beginning, the end, when you need encouragement. My email address is caitlinelizabethjans@gmail.com.
Additional Resources

**How To Submit Your Manuscript For Publication**

This comprehensive essay is filled with links to helpful articles. It covers everything you need to know about submitting.

**How To Start Submitting Your Work To Literary Journals**

This article offers information about how to start submitting shorter work (everything from poetry to flash fiction) to literary journals. Having your work published in literary journals, even if that work is completely unrelated to your novel, can really help get your novel published.

**Thirteen Literary Journals That Publish Novel Excerpts**

These thirteen journals all publish novel excerpts, some of published novels, some of unpublished. This can really help you legitimize or promote your novel, depending on where you are in your publishing journey.
Authors Publish: Complete List Of Manuscript Publishers Reviews
Scroll down to get past our most recent reviews of manuscript publishers and see our complete list of previous publishers that we have reviewed organized by genre. All the publishers we review are open to unsolicited submissions.