



# The Thinking Room

## ... about Writing: Planning a Story

from: <http://www.russellweb.org.uk>

**Many people launch straight into writing their stories without planning them in advance.** For some, the act of planning disrupts their creative thinking and leaves them feeling like they are producing a thing rather than creating art.

I sympathise with those feelings; there is nothing more satisfying than those moments when a story is flowing effortlessly from my imagination straight onto the page:

**It is very exciting to be 'in the moment', enjoying the action as both its creator and simultaneously experiencing it from my characters' perspectives.**

That privileged position is the peak of creativity, where all things are possible and we can surprise ourselves with the choices that our characters make.

However, writing without some form of plan is also very chaotic. By definition we won't know how the story will develop, or which narrative threads will produce the most engaging storylines for the reader, or how tension will be maintained between events as our story progresses.

Writing in this way requires us to be very flexible in our approach. We have to be prepared to constantly re-work our writing in order to reorder scenes into a more logical sequence, delete material which leads to dead ends, re-define and re-shape our characters to fit the action which develops, and potentially re-focus the work if the emerging plotline doesn't match our opening intentions. This can yield some marvellously imagined writing but it is also inefficient.

For a full-time writer this must necessarily represent an opportunity cost of the other writing which will never be completed and sold. For a part-time writer in a world where so many other things compete for our time, **it could be the difference between completing the story and having it remain as an unfulfilled dream.**

I keenly felt the pain of deficient planning when writing my first novel, "**An End of Beginnings**". It took about 3 years to write and competed with many other work and private-life events for my attention. I had a concept for the story I wanted to tell but no clear direction. This meant that every time I had to put the story down I quickly lost track of where I had been heading. When the writing restarted I would have to spend a lot of time reminding myself of what had happened so far and then re-imagining what would happen next.

After several cycles like that the whole process ground to a halt in mid-2013 when I realised I had a problem with the plotting of the story. It then took two months to fix the plot and edit the work I'd already written. At this stage I had already been developing the story for 18 months, and it still took me a further 18 months to finish it once the plot had been fixed.

***In retrospect, if I had planned the tale more thoroughly from the outset it might have only taken 2 years to complete instead of 3. Who has a year to waste of the writing lives?***

In my latest project I am stitching together ideas from 3 short stories that were at varying stages of development into a single novel called "**Dead Snow**". I am content to let shorts run straight



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from my imagination onto the page but, once I realised that these tales were going to become a novel, I started to use the skills I learnt when writing that first book to ensure that I prepare properly for this one.

This is now my approach to planning a novel:

1. Write all the initial ideas down: it doesn't matter where you do that as long as you capture them when you think of them.
2. Condense your initial thoughts into a single document: this is going to become a master resource for the novel when you start the writing.
3. Be explicit about the Themes you want to explore and how the Plot will generally develop.
4. Think about the Setting: where will the action take place and how does that shape the characters?
5. Define your key characters: describe them in detail so you will be able to describe them consistently and authentically.
6. Write down a main flow for the story: this might be a sequenced list of scenes or a list of events in chapter order, for example. This main flow becomes your main template for the book.
7. Make notes about supporting characters and describe them in the depth needed to write about them competently.

For "*Dead Snow*" my initial thoughts were captured either directly into Word or in a notebook. They were then condensed into a single Word document that has become the template for the story. I recorded general thoughts about Theme and Plot in this template.

My settings had mostly been defined in the work I had previously invested in the 3 short stories. As this story also builds on an earlier published short called "*In the Web*", I have made use of some of those characters before defining the other main characters that are needed. All my character definitions are recorded on the excellent '*Fiction Writer's Character Chart*' created by Rebecca Sinclair (see my earlier blog article about that).

I am currently defining the main flow of the story using a combination of the **FreeMind** mind-mapping tool (freely available on a GNU General Public License), Excel to hold chapter summaries and Word. I am looking forward to getting stuck into the story – I can already see that it will be a good one!

How will you plan your next story?

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