

How to write a book...



Guy in a reflective moment

They say everyone reckons they could be a drummer in a rock band, or land a plane if the pilot suddenly became ill or is a wannabe author who has a book in them. I thought I really should find out if I had it in me to realise my potential as a writer now that I'm retired and have sooo much time on my hands (*Ha!*), so who better to plump for ideas and inspiration than good friend and neighbour; renowned author-turned-teacher, Guy MacDonald who has some 25 books under his belt?

He started by explaining that some had been written in collaboration with a close team of friends and the rest on his own. But, whether writing on his own or with others, the production of a finished piece of work has to be undertaken with purpose to succeed. In either case one single fact pretty much applies. It takes a great deal of time and effort to achieve your ambition. Or is that two facts?

Mainly, you gotta wanna!

“So, what motivates you? How do you get started?” I asked. “Do you, could you start with; *“Once upon a time...”* and work from that?” “It helps to have a clear idea just why do you want to do this and who it's for. What will you add to their knowledge or enjoyment? What do you have to say that's fresh and different?” Replied Guy.

What are you trying to achieve? It helps to start with an overall idea what the book or story is about. What's the point? Could you outline your ideas in a couple of minute's conversation with some friends? Does it have an *ahhh* factor? “Sometimes”, said Guy, “Photoshopping a picture and adding elements

in the background and creating a working title to mock up a cover, helped encapsulate the essence of the book.”

It certainly helps to talk to people about your idea to see if they can help you decide what you need to do to get them to buy your book. If you don't have an audience, you may be on hiding to nothing.



Guy engaging with one of his readers

However some writers start with a title. It may be a phrase from a play or another publication – “*Dogs of War*” for instance. It may be a couple of evocative words like “*Night Fighter*” which provides some expectation in the reader. “I had a go at that suggested title of “*Night Fighter*”, by the way, but just couldn't get a story to fit it,” reflected Guy.

Sometimes it may be a single object that could lead to an idea. I remembered a pupil whose eventual design for a bedside cabinet was based on the chance finding of an interesting and old-fashioned door knob. “Exactly!” agreed Guy.



Here's another thing to exercise your imagination; make a story from the images you see here. Use them in any order, as many or as few as you like.

“Can you describe the end of the book? Should it end with a bang, a show down, an exposure a complete surprise in the last few lines – think about the closing scene in the film *The Likely Suspects*? Get that down in ten words or less. The book will take twists and turns as you write, but you need to know where you want it to end to keep it on track. It will give you confidence to know it has a cracking ending. In children’s books, knowing the ending is essential,” says Guy recalling his experiences with the “*Beastly Business*” stories. “Children like a simple, clear cut ending,”

“Here are a couple of tests you should try”, suggests Guy; “Can you write the blurb on the back of the book? And what’s the expression on the face of the person you’re telling about your book? Do they switch off with a blurred expression or do they ask you for more?”



Or do you have a something whooshy in mind as a reward for your labours?

Write a time chart to plan your progress. How how much must you attain to be on target? What is a reasonable date by which to get it done? Consider activities that will occur during this period. Birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, standing invitations and commitments. Do you have regular social meetings with family, work and friends which need to be factored in? Which is more important? If you don’t make some sacrifices, your motivation is reduced and the task made less important. Remember the carrot and stick principle! On this chart put some major targets for your work. Number of pages written, chapters complete, illustrations/photos in place, research material found or at least sourced and so on. Will you need to do any interviews or go somewhere for information? When does it need to be done by?

Knowledge is power. The more you know and can find out is what will be your biggest asset and help. Immerse yourself in the subject. Talk to people, go to places collect stuff, get into the minds of the characters and locations. Pick up jargon and special phrases. Be an expert. Be a nerd!



You need to read some books about your chosen subject. This will give you an idea about the sort of language and vocabulary appropriate to your ideas. Do your research into the topic. Read and analyse what you like – or not about their work. Talk to people about your idea and gauge their interest and expectation.

Write down interesting phrases and scenarios as they come to you. They will help to shape your narrative. A strong setting is a good idea. Consider a haunted castle; you have creaking doors, clanking chains, drooping cobwebs, strange smells. “It has its own world,” says Guy. If yours is based on “*An Ordinary Life*”, what exactly do you mean by “ordinary”? “Start to observe what you and others do unconsciously as you and they go about daily routines.

Interesting locations help you to draw your readers into the plot. Add local detail, names and places. Again, it’s part of your research to get enough information to seem at least convincing. It would be necessary, for instance, to at least mention the Posada San Pedro in Puebla if you were writing a book in which some action took place in Mexico, or how the nomadic Kyrgyz survive in the desolate, treeless, frozen wastelands of the Wakhan corridor in the remote northeast Afghanistan. (Ok. I looked that up, but you get the idea.)

It’s the clever, accurate little details that give your story a sense of realism,” he says. If it’s based on Eastbourne, for instance, go there if you can. Collect names and places. Walk it. Photograph it. Go to the local museum and local newspaper archive. Visit the church and graveyard. Google some history. Build a library of knowledge to add colour and relevant detail to your book. “Stick it on the wall or in a scrap book for easy reference to keep the creative juices flowing,” says Guy, who favoured the scrap book idea when writing “*The Dangerous Book for Boys*”. “There was a lot of data I had collected. Just too much to stick on a wall,” he recalls.



Make a mood board. This is a large sheet of paper pinned to a wall on which you can stick, write post, attach, and sketch random ideas as the mood takes you. It’s a bit like capturing a dream or flash of inspiration. In itself it’s nothing, but it’s going to feed your imagination. Pictures and notes stuck to a wall are powerful reminders that will keep the initial excitement alive for you. You will, more than likely, get a bit hacked off and the board should help to refocus you. Some writers use a mood music compilation to keep them focussed and in the groove. “I’d probably just listen to the music”, laughed Guy. Buying a small note book to carry around with you all the time is a good idea too.



Anything counts. Don’t eliminate at this stage. It grows as you add ideas.

Create characters with clear personalities. Try to make them easy to identify with as your story develops. You can add strengths and weaknesses as the plot develops. “Names are important,” explains Guy They help to reinforce the role of the character. “I mean, you’d hardly quail at a villain called *Eric* or *Deirdre*, would you? However *Professor Ivalotovbomz* and *Miss Whiplash* begin to flesh out the persona – well, perhaps not in a young child’s book! Try and give them accents in your mind to shape their speech and character” illustrates Guy. Your characters should have skills and abilities that are essential to the story and could be put in a place or situation that your readers are familiar with and can identify with, or alternatively, completely out of their comfort zone to raise a sense of danger, awe and anxiety.



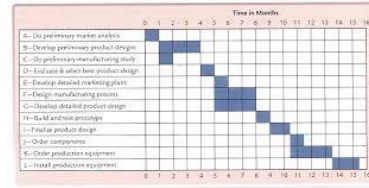
Here’s a little exercise in avoiding stereotyping characters. In each case ignore what seems so obvious and think differently about the women; what do they really do, what unusual skill or ability do they have that fits into your storyline?

Action and information will sell your book. Physical feats of strength, skill and expertise are gold. Breathless running, jumping and fighting raise the pace and help fill pages – Like Matthew Reilly’s (appallingly written, but physically exhausting) *Scarecrow*. Technical stuff shows your subject knowledge and adds great flexibility to the movement of plot lines. I think Tom Clancy’s astounding description of sequence of chemical reactions in the detonation of a nuclear bomb in *The Sum of All Fears*, for instance, should be put in a frame and hung on a wall it’s so exquisitely detailed and Richard Patterson’s knowledge about submarine warfare is not only gripping stuff but unequalled.



Plotting the progress of your book covers two areas; quality and quantity. What’s happened so far? What happens next? How will you do this? What will the key feature of this be? Is your target audience still interested in the book? Is the next chapter ready and will it add to the plot/character? Do you have a measure of where you should be and are you on target?

Be ruled by deadlines or the work will suffer from a lack of continuity, focus and interest. A target date may be set by a publisher, as in Guy's case, or the need to get it finished in time for an event or anniversary. If you are too easy about finishing the work, it may not get done at all, he warns.



Guy did mention a couple of writers such as Jeffrey Archer and Barbara Cartland who, because of their prolific output, were seemingly able to just sit down and churn out page after page with little apparent planning. "But that's just showing off", sniffed Guy disdainfully...

To make progress, you have to get into a routine. Like you did at school. Be ready to work. Do your chores, clear your schedule. Get rid of distractions. Have all the material you need to hand. Clear your mind. There's just one thing to do, now. Write!



Give yourself a stick and a carrot. Set a target. Say 1500 words by 10.15 or a chapter drafted or rewritten by the end of the day. Achieve it and you get a reward. A coffee, a walk, a chocolate. Fail and you have to pay a forfeit. Something unpleasant. Clean the oven. Defrost the freezer. Clear the garden of dog poo. Whatever it takes to make you prefer to be productive. You chose to undertake the writing task, so make sure you are fully focussed and committed.

However, there is a danger that these diversionary tasks may become replacement activities! "You'll end up with the cleanest windows, neatest lawn and immaculate cupboards as you try to escape the tyranny of your book!" Laughed Guy, probably remembering his experiences. "This is especially a risk when you are re-writing a section," warns Guy. "You'll do a lot of that! Pages of it. Getting it right takes application. It's easy to write a bad book. It takes stickability to make it a good one," he adds, with a serious look.

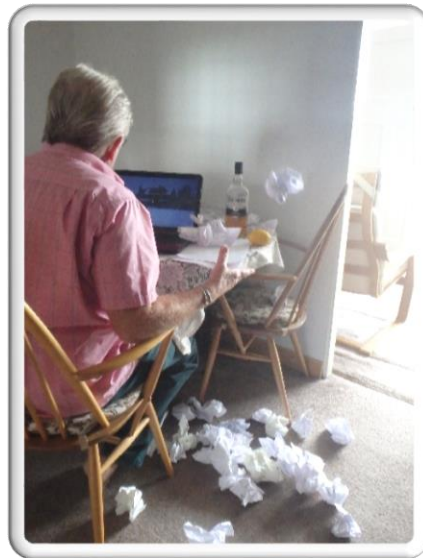
Your working environment is important.

Ok, ideally it's an isolated beach house, in the tropics, a warm breeze, and a susurrating, *sch-schhh-ing* surf. Its 10.00am, you're rested and breakfasted, laptop charged and actually working (not in my world!), research neatly stacked beside you and the promise of an afternoon swim. Yeah, right! Dream on. The harsh reality is West Farleigh, wife a bit fractious, laptop running slow, knackered. 10.00pm...



You may need to work in isolation facing a blank wall with the curtains drawn because you're too easily distracted. Others may perform well in a public place like a library or even in a café. It's whatever works for you. Guy said that for him, it was being alone with no one around. Being in the right environment may also be part of being able to overcome writers' block, where going for a short walk in familiar surroundings helps sort out a problem with a stalled plot or wonky chapter. Guy, like Dickens, for instance was a walker. "Perhaps the rhythm and energy involved broke the dam," he suggested.

If you're doing it properly, writing should be all-consuming. You must go the extra mile - and some. "Remember, it's easy to write a bad book" Guy emphasises, but tactfully won't be drawn into giving an example. The readers' views on this article might be of interest as I found it difficult to get all the bits done in good time and I lost a bit of momentum in it. I started with two pages which have grown to nine and I found a lot to add to the bulk of the text which wasn't in my thinking when I started. In reviewing it – yet again, I have thought about a couple of pictures I could add to illustrate a point. And, as Guy pointed out, I did have to do a lot of rewriting!



-*-

For my book, then, it's an ending I have in mind - actually a phrase I've been working on. My first draft goes;

"It was over. The alien invasion fleet had been decimated after desperate months of facing wave after wave of suicidal attacks. Where they actually came

from was conjecture and no one knew what they looked like or sounded like as no face-to-face contact had ever been made.

The elusive scout ships they sent were soon followed by vast fleets of powerfully armed ships that deployed to attack without any preamble. What they wanted or why they were so aggressive was never communicated or guessed.

They had won because the tactical analysts, programming geniuses and highly skilled systems technicians, battle-hardened generals, cyrptographers and code breakers and huge teams of mathematicians and information processors had found a tiny chink in the swirling attacking patterns of the invaders. It wasn't much, but the configuration of the assaults could be computed and energy switched and defences boosted to repel the waves of onslaughts as the invaders attacked, withdrew, regrouped and reattacked. Time after time, relentlessly, with no regard for the appalling losses they were suffering.

The cost in terms of death and destruction, producing new weapons, their complex power sources and control systems was astronomical, beyond counting. Recovery would be long and austere. The future was bleak at best, but they were safe for the foreseeable future. Probably.

Supreme commander O'Neill remained motionless, drained of any emotion or thought, in the vast, crowded command centre where now a rushing silence replaced the frantic clamour they had lived in for month after month. Year after year. She pushed herself back and stretched her tentacles to ease the strain in them. Her work was done. She emitted two small pulses of water and glided to the doorway where she paused and turned back. A nearby technician caught her attention. O'Neill swivelled a couple of eye stalks back and twitched a tentacle in acknowledgement. "Just another day in the office" she signalled. And left, trailing a tentacle across a fragment of a downed invader's ship's hull attached to the wall on which there was an as yet un-deciphered design...



Oh, no! Now I've spoiled it for you. You know the end. I'll just have to start again;

Once upon a time...