

Walter Dean Myers:

Thoughts on Creative Writing

When I first made the commitment to full time writing I knew I needed to understand why other writers I knew were *not* doing well despite high talent levels. What I knew from my seven years as an editor was that only a portion of the books put under contract were actually completed and submitted for publication. As I polled my writer friends and acquaintances I discovered that the major problem was not bad writing, but the inability to complete books. I developed an outlining technique which works out the major problems in a book before the actual writing begins. In these outlines I am asking myself two questions: Is this really an idea complete enough to become a book? If not, can it be amplified to become a book idea?

The first outline is short, no more than six half pages and will give me a strong indication as to the completeness of the project. In this outline I divide the book into six sections of unequal length, knowing what is necessary in each.

Section I. Here I know that I have to establish the central character(s) and establish the problem which will form the arc of the story. Without a strong central character the book becomes much more difficult to write and to sell. Some genre books (mysteries, romance novels) don't have a strong central character and rely on plot but the character has some interesting aspect (a woman detective, a wheelchair bound person) that helps distinguish it. The next thing I absolutely must have is a problem that is sufficiently complex to carry the book for the two hundred plus pages we're shooting for. If the problem is not sufficiently interesting you'll find a thousand reasons not to be writing. Both the character and the problem have to be established early or the reader at the publishing house will reject the book after the first twenty or thirty pages.

I had a friend supposedly writing a book about a woman 'looking for her roots.' She was having difficulty. I asked this author why I should care about this woman *or* her roots.

Section II. Here we need to try all the obvious solutions to the problem. Your reader will expect you to do this. If any of them can work the book will end here. The problem simply isn't complex enough to carry the book.

Section III. Here we engage both the central character and the reader in trying to find a different solution. Perhaps we have attempted to reason with the abusive husband in section I. Here we might try to consult a therapist or even escape with the children. If your problem is as complex as it should be these won't work either.

Section IV. Here the character grows and acquires new insights into the problem and into their own approach. We've set the story up and here we have the reward for the reader. For within the insights that our central character has there are insights for the reader as well. If the central character has been well delineated up to this point we now understand, along with the character, the nature of the underlying problems. We share an intimacy with our character that we rarely achieve in real life.

Section V. Here, armed with the insights of Section IV, we begin the final attempt to solve the problem and will end either in success or a deeper understanding of why we can't come to a completely satisfying solution. In *Death of a Salesman* Willy Loman understands that it is not the world around him that is out of sync, but that he has failed. Feeling it is too late for him to change, he kills himself.

Section VI. Here we wrap up the loose ends and bring the book to a satisfying ending. This is usually, in my books, a short section.

The second outline gives me the opportunity to see how I am going to flesh out my story. It's going to force me to think the book through and do the preliminary work, very much akin to creating an armature for a clay sculpture. The armature, usually heavy wire, supports the final form and will later allow the sculptor to concentrate on detail. What I am doing with these two outlines is attempting to create a structurally sound core for my novel.

The second outline consists of 30 scenes following the sections created in the first outline. In these scenes I am concerned with fullness. Is it really a scene or just a thought the character has or a moment's action? *Carla comes home and finds Jim in bed with her sister.* This is a moment, not a complete scene. I want each scene to occupy at least five full pages. *Carla, trying to decide if she should leave Jim, stops for dinner at B's restaurant. She runs into her sister there and wants to join her but her sister becomes very upset and suddenly has to leave. Carla wonders if her sister is also having marital difficult. She orders dinner and is wondering if she should have ordered something lighter when Jim comes in. She spots him and waves. He looks quickly around the restaurant and when he comes over says he was just looking for an old army buddy. Carla invites him to stay for dinner but he, too, has to leave in a hurry. He is on his cell phone as he leaves. Carla is left alone with her thoughts and understands for the first time that Jim is also thinking about leaving her or, in the least, he is having an affair.*

I'll actually spend a month working out the details of this outline. I'll take it to bed with me, to the bathroom, on subways. Here is where I'll discover if I do indeed have a novel. Here is where I work it out sufficiently so that I never have writer's block! There will, of course, be variations when I actually start the novel, but I know I will have enough material to write a complete novel. If I spend the full month in creating these 30 scenes, living with the characters, beginning to introduce subplots, I will avoid sitting in front of a blank page wondering what to go next. The time spent here will lead me to completion. Sometimes I discover that I don't have enough material, or sufficient complexity for a novel. I then put the book aside and move on to something else. This is always a disappointment but it's better than working three years on a book and then discovering that it doesn't work.

Why 30 scenes? 30 scenes at 5 pages a scene will give me a very short novel, perhaps a middle grade or young adult book. If I come up with more scenes as I write (sub-plots) it will give me a longer novel. 30 scenes at 10 pages a scene will give me a conventionally weighted novel of 300 pages. Again, I am not slavish to this outline, just creating the core that will lead to the New York Times bestseller list!