21 Days to a Novel

New York Times bestselling novelist Michael A. Stackpole presents a three-week program for preparing yourself to write a novel. This set of 21 exercises is broken down to give you everything from character creation to world building, practical plotting devices, dialogue development and character voice creation tools. This program is a practical, kick-in-the-pants place to start your career. (RinCon 10 website)

On October 9th, 2010, I took the unprecedented step of waking up at 8 AM on a Saturday morning so that I could bike down to RinCon 10 at the Tucson Convention Center for this presentation/writing workshop, during which Michael Stackpole gave tips and pointers to myself and the two other people in the room who were crazy enough to wake up at that hour.

That said, I thought it was definitely worth the "extra effort" on my part. The "21 days" is not a joke: in three weeks (probably less), it’s more than possible to fully outline a novel - characters and conflict and plot and world and all. All that’s left is the wherewithal to actually sit down and write out the novel afterward. And while a lot of Michael Stackpole's advice seemed like common sense, there were pieces of advice here and there that made me go “Huh. I would not have otherwise focused on that, but now that I think about it, it would have been really bad times if I hadn’t.”

The following are adapted from notes I took during the presentation. While I took the notes in bullet form, I took the liberty of converting it back into prose for readability while trying to maintain Stackpole’s original intent. Really, I should have recorded the whole thing, but somehow that did not occur to me. Live and learn, I guess?

Anyhow, enjoy, and I hope you find it sufficiently edifying.

Juhyung Sun
2010-11 Provost of UA Sci-Fi Cats

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The average novel (especially for someone trying to get published for the first time) will run about 80,000 - 120,000 words. No more than 6,000 words a day. If that still sounds like a lot, you should keep two things in mind:

1) Writing gets faster the more you do it.
2) Never sweat the first draft.

You will write multiple drafts before you get anything published. Your editor will almost certainly ask for more than one draft. This is not a problem. What is a problem is worrying so much about the first draft that you never finish it. A finished first draft is something you can work with and revise - and consequently, something that someone else to work with and revise and maybe contemplate publishing. On the other hand, obsessing over getting a particular scene
just right will make it that much harder for you to reach the end of your story, possibly ending your efforts before they’ve even really begun.

So the takeaway message here is to write, write, write - and don’t stop writing. Better to have lots of rough edges to smooth out in the end than to not have anything to work with at all.

**Days 1 - 11: Characterization**

While a few authors do get away with lackluster or mediocre characterization, they are in a very small minority - and their careers are often not the most sustainable. For the vast majority of authors, characterization is absolutely key to a good novel. Thus, you'll spend the first 11 days (over half of the three weeks!) focusing on creating a set of characters, each with their own quirks, goals, and sources of conflict.

**Day 1:** Since it's the first day, the exercise here is fairly gentle. Just write five sentences about a particular character you plan to have in your novel. Each of these sentences should cover a distinct aspect of that character, such as education, work, social position, love life, or whatever else you like.

**Day 2:** Support or develop the ideas in each of those five sentences with two additional sentences. Essentially, you flesh out your initial five sentences into five three-sentence paragraphs. The key here is to elaborate on those original five sentences, not create contrast; that comes later.

**Day 3:** For each of those five paragraphs, write an additional sentence that *contrasts* with the ideas presented in the paragraph. Now you have five three-sentence paragraphs detailing five different aspects of your first character, each accompanied by a sentence that stands in opposition.

**Day 4:** Support or develop the ideas in each of those opposing five sentences with two additional sentences. Now you have five opposing pairs of paragraphs and the key to engaging your readers: conflict. Readers might be drawn in by the premise of the novel, but things like conflict, paradox, opposition, tension and the like will keep them reading. Remember that a novel with no conflict isn’t much of a novel at all.

**Day 5:** Days 1 through 4 are an example of “Blitzkrieg characterization,” where you quickly come up with the basic background of a character as well as meatier elements of tension that will give you something to work with when you start writing the novel proper. And as you probably noticed, this characterization could be done in a single day - maybe even a single hour.
That’s precisely what happens on Day 5. Repeat the steps for days 1 through 4 for a second character. But don’t worry about setting up protagonists or antagonists at this point; you’ll worry about interpersonal relationships later.

**Day 6:** Write down some goals that your characters have. A good start is to think of two short-term and one long-term goal for each. Also, think about how these different characters’ goals might conflict with each other. In fact, try to make it happen. Even if the two characters’ goals don’t technically contradict (especially if they’re on the “same side”), friction between their aims will be more grist for the story mill. And more importantly, it keeps the reader engaged.

**Day 7:** A goal is only a goal if it hasn’t been fulfilled yet. So on Day 7, think about what obstacles or fears have prevented your characters from fulfilling their dreams or desires. If you can’t clearly define these barriers, then any semblance of plot will quickly go down the tubes— you want your characters to take an entire novel to fulfill their aims, not just a few pages.

**Day 8:** At this point, you’re probably getting better at characterization, which is good. Because today, you’ll need to complete the steps in Days 1-7 for a *third* character. While it’s possible to have a dynamic story with just two characters, it’s even easier to write one with three. People in triads pull each other along with more energy, because with increased interaction comes more opportunity for...well, whatever you want: conflict, resolution, plot twist, etc.

With respect to characters, there are two ways to kill a story. The first is not knowing your characters very well (which is precisely what these eight days try to avoid!). The second is not having enough energy behind character interactions. And one of the surest ways to suck energy out of a scene is to *remove* characters. Avoid this temptation (no matter how much easier it'll seem to make things). In fact, if anything, you should be tempted to *add* more characters, which creates more opportunity for interaction. Not at the expense of confusing the reader, of course, but that's part of your job. :-)

**Day 9:** This day brings a rather interesting exercise. Write out a letter from one of your characters to another. In this letter, the writer should demonstrate some semblance of vulnerability towards the recipient of the letter (which gives the recipient an opportunity to interact with the letter writer’s problems). Also think about what this letter might look like physically. Will it be a bunch of messy scrawl on a piece of notebook paper? A typeset masterpiece complete with formal letterhead? A bunch of cut-out letters from random magazine clippings a la stereotypical ransom note?

What you might (hopefully) find is that in thinking about the content of this letter as well as its physical appearance, you’ll actually extrapolate character traits that you hadn’t thought of before. Perhaps you hadn’t thought of your character as particularly fastidious or dignified, but you
always imagine him writing on fine parchment with crisp clean, quill-inscribed handwriting. Because as much as character creation is a directed process, there’s also an element of serendipity in determining who your character is - and this sort of creative process can help it along. Sometimes the random places or actions you associate with your character can be just as helpful in defining your character as the stuff you had planned from the start.

Just to be clear, this letter is meant purely as a characterization exercise. Whether or not you include it in your novel is up to you.

Day 10: Imagine a meeting between the letter writer and recipient after the letter has been delivered and read. Write out the dialogue for this meeting, and only the dialogue - no descriptions! This will let you focus on the characterization through speech. The length of sentences, the breadth of vocabulary, little mannerisms and regionalisms - all of these will add depth to the identity of these two characters. Sophisticated? Uneducated? Older? Younger? All of these things (and more) will come across in what your characters say and how they say it.

Day 11: Imagine that the third character (the one not involved in the letter writing) is observing the meeting between the first two characters. Write what he or she objectively sees during each line of dialogue written in Day 10 (this is the description part of the dialogue).

The main thing here is to avoid the use of “he said” or “she said” or any similar derivative: “he/she yelled/whispered/cried/etc.” This is more than a stylistic choice. When a reader sees a sentence like

**He said nervously, ‘I’m not sure.’**

there is no room for interpretation. The reader knows immediately that the character said something, and that he was nervous while doing it. If on the other hand, you wrote

**He chewed a bit on his nail. ‘I’m not sure.’**

then the character’s nervous nature has to be inferred (despite how obvious the physical cue is), and if the reader wants to verify this interpretation of the character’s mood, they have no choice but to keep reading. And so the more you force readers to infer and interpret, the more inferences and interpretations they’ll need to verify, and the more they’ll need to keep reading - and be led right along by your novel.

It should be becoming clear now that a good part of an engaging novel is psychological manipulation.
Another thing to think about is the integration of characters' physical description with narrative. The temptation to simply spend an entire paragraph describing a character’s physical features can be overwhelming, but there is definite value to sprinkling this physical description throughout the course of the dialogue. For instance, in writing the sentence

*He scratched furiously at his tangle of black hair as he waited for a response.*

you can convey details about his physical appearance while suggesting either a nervous habit or simply poor hygiene (Which one is it? The reader will have to keep reading to figure that out). Also remember that the emotional connection that the reader feels towards a character is generally more important than the accuracy of your physical description. If you sacrifice a bit of the latter to preserve the former, don’t sweat it.

A little note on number of characters and length: What you’ve defined here are three viewpoint characters whose perspective will largely dominate the story. For the first few novels you write, three is the most you’ll want to have. A “growth arc” of a character (their story) ideally takes up about 30,000 words, so three characters will land you well within the ideal 80 - 120,000 word range for a first novel.

**Days 12 - 15: World-building**

Besides hashing out the details of the setting, the process of world-building also ensures that characters are actually rooted in their surroundings. Realistically, one is influenced by one’s environment - and influences one’s environment in turn. The following days address those issues.

While you're constructing the world in which your novel takes place, it might help to consider the world as a character in itself, with the overall plot of your novel being the world’s “story arc.”

**Day 12:** Consider what connects the characters to their world. What influence has the world had on the characters, e.g., in shaping who they are?

**Day 13:** Thinking more about how the world influences the characters, write down how the world helps or hinders their life goals. You probably defined much of this when you were considering the factors that prevented the characters from achieving their goals so far.

**Day 14:** If the characters succeed or fail at their life goals, how will the world change? At which points will the world “push back” on the characters' actions? It’s crucial to address these consequences because ideally, the world will react to what happens to the characters.
In general, it’s good to thoroughly think through the consequences or logical implications of any particular aspect of the world. This is particularly important in science fiction, where new technologies abound and distinctly affect the world in their own ways. Carry out the consequences of these technologies to their logical extreme! You’ll build a more credible world and you’ll likely find more interesting elements or issues to integrate into your plot.

**Day 15:** Write a brief scene involving each of the characters. It doesn’t matter whether they’re convening in the same location or whether they’re in their own private sanctuaries. What is important is that you describe how the characters perceive their surroundings, tying together characterization and the world.

**Days 16 - 20: Plot and Story**
We've got characters and the world in which they live; now we can finally put together the plot and what actually happens.

**Day 16:** Write a tagline for your novel and the blurb you would find on its back cover. This isn’t meant to delineate the boundaries of your novel, but rather give you a little guideline in the days to come.

**Day 17:** This is the most difficult day of this entire process. So difficult in fact, that we actually need to define two terms before we move on.

*Scene* - something that happens to a character

*Event* - something that happens in a world’s story arc

The first thing to develop is each character’s story (growth) arc. Remember that change *alone* does not necessarily imply growth. For growth to happen, the character also needs to engage in conscious analysis and a change of mentality. This conscious evaluation can also follow from the characters’ unconscious reaction to their surroundings.

The story arc itself will be driven by cycles of conflict and resolution (or lack thereof) that can be loosely defined as follows:

1) A description and exposition of the problem

2) Scenes in which the character realizes that this problem exists

3) Some catalyzing event that spurs the character into action to resolve this problem
4) Scenes in which the character develops the resources to resolve the problem

5) The character’s success or failure in resolving the problem.

At the end of this rather long day, you’ll likely end up with ideas for something like five scenes per character, for a total of about 15 scenes.

**Day 18**: Group these scenes into major world events. That is, define the story arc for the world you've built in terms of the scenes you wrote in Day 17.

**Day 19**: Look at the world events you defined in Day 18 and determine each character’s reaction to each event. Think through the consequences of their reactions and how the world and the characters change as a result. Remember: thoroughly considering all of the possible implications will reward you with a more immersive plot and world.

**Day 20**: This is the day where you get to order the characters' scenes and slide them together to form the actual outline of the novel. This is also where you really get to play with readers’ expectations. A simple way to maintain reader interest is to construct a rigid cycle of chapters like A, B, C, A, B, etc., where A, B, and C correspond to a focus on a particular character. If you're good about ending each of these chapters with a little cliff-hanger (where some of the implications of the chapter are undefined), you’ll really force the reader to keep turning the pages; to find out what happens to character A, they have to read through characters B and C, and by the time they get back to character A, they’ll want to figure out what happened to the others!

Generally, a novel will end up with about 40 chapters of about ~2500 words each. Keep chapters short. Short chapters egg on the reader (especially if they end in cliffhangers), whereas long chapters will tempt the reader to put in their bookmark and call it a night.

**Day 21 - End game**

**Day 21**: After 20 days of planning, this is the day where you actually start writing your novel proper. As we suggested earlier, write, write, write, and don't stop writing - focus on finishing that first draft! As you do so, keep four things in mind.

1) Every word written is a word closer to the end of the novel! Every word you don't write - well, you can figure it out.

2) Never edit as you go. *Never, never, never.* Remember that you'll be obligated to revise the story when you're "finished" because by its very nature, the end of the novel will change how
you perceive the beginning of the story. If you need to retcon, make a note of it and don't worry too much; retrofitting a novel is actually not as difficult as it would seem. But never edit until you've finished that first draft; you're not saving yourself any effort by writing and editing at the same time, and you're likely just causing yourself more grief.

I just want to point out that after I attended this presentation, I started writing essays (or stuff like this guide) with this philosophy in mind - and it does seem to cut down on the stress! I've found that writing a bunch of quick drafts in succession is actually less painful than obsessing over a single one.

3) Make a hard copy. And always back stuff up. Save your work and copy it at the end of every day. You never, ever want to be in the situation where a computer failure makes you lose days of work.

4) Watch your word counts, and be especially wary of making chapters too long.

Eventually (given persistence and time), you’ll have your first draft! At this point, clear your mind. When you edit your story, you don’t want the author side of your brain to fill in holes in the story - you need to approach it as a reader. Learn how to switch your brain from “author mode” to “editor mode,” and vice versa. Or quite simply, write as a writer and edit as an editor.

Keep editing and revising until it seems that you’re changing less than 10% your novel on each pass. And don’t worry that you’re not changing enough. Even after you're "finished," professional editors will give you plenty to think about anyway.

And there you have it! "All" that’s left is publishing. And a bit of luck never hurts.