START TO FINISH:

PUTTING IN THE GUTS:
FROM THE PLAN TO THE DRAFT

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(Disclaimer: This article is a little long)

So you've gone through the planning stage for your book. You've given it a voice, something to say, and conquered the roadblock dragon. You're on your way now and nothing can stop you from writing this story now. Except, what do you write about? You've got the planning checklist done so it should be easy but, it's not. All those ideas for a story aren't going to help if you can't organize them, and the questions that come with them aren't helping the quickly setting in anxiety…or are they?

What do I write about? Where, Who, and How do I set this up? Who's listening? Normally these questions would instill a fear like no other and maybe even a bit of nausea but, we're going to get through this together. We're going to answer these questions with more ease than a Final Exam in your least favorite school subject, right now.

Let's talk about Guts: What do I write about?

So here we are at the starting line of our story's first words. It's a veritable showdown between you, and a set of blank pages. You've planned out your voice, what you have to say, and why it's important, so here's the natural next step. What do you write about? That's a really simple question, with a not so simple answer obviously. When you consider the plethora of ideas you have, and the scores of stories you might have floating around your head, it's hard to pick just one. On the other hand, maybe you have no idea what you want to write about, and that blank page is the scariest horror movie you've ever seen now. Before you panic, remember we're going to get through this. Not knowing where to start or what to write about is perfectly fine. If you have too many ideas in your head about stories, start snatching them and writing them down. It doesn't have to be a complete novel, just a sentence or two will do.

If you don't have a clue yet, don't despair. Even this can be overcome. Start simple. Fiction or Non Fiction, choose one or the other.

Say you chose non-fiction…Cool. Let's take a look at what needs to happen next.

- **Historical/Current**
- **(Auto) Biography/Memoirs**
- **School Studies and/or Dissertations**
- **Essays and Critiques**
- **How-To and/or Self Help**
- **Religious or Philosophical**

The list could go on for a while but, you probably get the idea here. You have several subjects to choose from in the Non-Fiction section of the book writing business. The next step in that is deciding which one appeals most to what you want to say and this is the vehicle that gets it to where you are heard. More on this in a moment, as we avoid neglecting the former choice.

Say you decided that Non-Fiction wasn't for you and decided to go with Fiction instead. Cool. Same choices different names.

- **Fantasy**
- **Action/Adventure**
- **Suspense/Thriller**
- **Horror**
- **Science Fiction**
- **Magical Realism (actually has both elements)**

As with before, the list goes on for what you could write about, considering I haven't listed everything and you can even mix and match them. So now that we have a fair amount of choices on either side, let's talk about which one appeals most. You likely know what you like to read about, but may not know what you like to write at or what you're good at.

Forget for a moment that writing a book can be a really long and tiring process. Focus on the voice you gave your book, and the purpose you instilled in what you are going to say. Based on what you want to say, decide which method and genre will fit the best. Try them out, and see what fits best with maybe a half page or so of writing your ideas into words. When you find the right flow, then we move on to the next part of winning the showdown with the blank pages.

Vital Organs: Where, When, and Who?

So here we are having chosen our preferred voice pitch, and we've got our idea at least basically decided. Now we're going to answer the questions that will believe it or not, make it easier to form your story. You may have noticed that **What** and **Why** are missing. Well we've already covered that in planning so, no need to rehash it. These questions are very important to ask yourself, when you want to take your story from an idea to a workable book. Normally in a Non-Fiction all these questions are already answered, depending on what you've chosen to cover, or they can be with a bit of research. We can still apply this next part to non-fiction and improve the book but, a lot of the information is already there and doesn't need to be made up so much as formulated to work the picture coherently.

Where:

It's a basic question that could take forever to answer because of its possibilities. *Where does this story start?* It's pretty a straightforward question so why is it so hard to answer? The answer is it's not, there's just a lot of choices to weed through to find what fits your idea. That, and having at least a general idea of what your story is going to be about. Nothing too detailed but, you should know your story's direction a bit before you tackle this one. Don't be afraid to spend time on that, when you have something to say so you want to be understood. You can always change things later, but knowing where you're going tells you where you should start. There's so much more we could focus on in the story but, we'll only follow these as components to starting the story for now. **Characters, setting (time/place), and theme (including conflict/climax/resolution)** are all tools to help you with this, so use them.

Who:

Picking up where we left off, let's talk about the *characters, setting, and theme* and cover that for a bit. As I said before, these parts of the story are really valuable tools in helping you get your story out on paper.

Characters: they help progress the story whether they're minor or major so it's important to have them, unless you enjoy writing about scenery that is. It's a choice but, for now let's stick with character-driven stories. No matter what you make your characters, make sure you give them depth. As a personal experience, I've found that adding depth and background to my characters has given me a better idea of what I want in my story and where I want it to go. So make your characters come alive in your mind, give them emotions, experiences, likes, dislikes, memories. Go all out on giving them personality; obviously minor characters will have less of this but all characters should serve the story in some way. It's great to make your characters come alive, but it's equally important not to have them outshine your story. With this in mind, add in moderation and leave a bit to the imagination…just like a perfect length skirt.

Setting: where and when does the story take place is actually a focus you should take into consideration alongside your character building. After all, the time period and culture(s) form the character, and what they are all about. The time and place is also a great place for you to explore the boundaries of how you tell your story and just how realistic or fantastical you want it to be.

In a setting you can get creative and create your own world, or you can use the standard world and make some stuff up along the way. Both ways are fun and require some structuring before you continue. Using the world/universe/whatever as you know it requires some research, it's not all just creativity there. The story can be as fantastical as you like, but there should to be an element of reality there to anchor it to. This is where research comes in handy, because you once you've decided where and when your story takes place you can create it. Knowing about the culture, laws, people, language, and atmosphere of your chosen place gives the story a more

tangible feeling. You can grow the fiction from there, but your anchor makes your world believable. After all, fiction should transport you to an exciting yet relatable place.

Creating a world of your own, doesn't necessarily require so much research, but that doesn't mean that none is involved. You still want to know the basics of how your world functions. Maybe be able to justify why it hasn't been crushed by a large meteor, or something else that flies into that part of your created universe. Since we've already covered research though, we're going to look at the creativity aspect. You should take notes on every part of your world and compare them to each other. You are making up a world, and that world comes with rules. As the creator, you want to make sure those rules don't contradict each other. In other words, it's up to you completely to figure out how everything works, why it works like that, and if you want to get really deep…how it came to work that way in the first place. And you thought making up a world from scratch would be a snap.

Theme: we're back to the original question: What do I write about? We pretty much came full circle on that. This time though, you have developed characters and setting under your belt. That question of *what is your story about* can now be broken down into three main parts, because you took the time to develop the other two. Here they are: **conflict, climax, resolution.**

It's no secret that people love to read about trouble, I mean have you ever tried to read through an entire book where nothing exciting happens at all. It's practically a recipe for helping you get to sleep, or finding something else to do. That's where the theme comes in, that simple and annoying question: **What is your story about?**

Conflict-what's going on in the story or more basically…what is the exciting part? What's the trouble? With the Characters and setting you created, you can get a good idea of where you were going. Your character's traits tend to reflect situations they can and can't handle as a result of their experience. There are exceptions to this, but in nearly every story this is the case. Your trouble can be built around this as well as the setting, which basically sets the limit on tools and tactics your characters can use to overcome that trouble.

Climax: the trouble has started, where does it go and what happens along the way? You've got your trouble and you're working it to the high point or the most exciting/suspenseful part. Your characters and setting have done their part to steer you there. They use what tools you gave them and now we're getting to the point of will it work or not.

Resolution: here's the ending or the cliffhanger. You decide what happens to your characters and whether they succeed or not, or if there's no way to tell yet. Whatever you decide, your resolution wraps up what is currently going on, and maybe lead in to another later part of the story. Nobody ever said a story had to have a happy ending or even a distinct one…there've been some stories to make you furious with the open-ended finish they made. The point is, whatever type of ending you choose, it should give enough closure to satisfy some part of the reader and the story.

How do I set this up and Who's Even Listening?

How do you set up the *Characters, Setting,* and *Theme* you just spent hours/days/weeks/months working on? You have all this awesomeness written out but, there's no real order other than the theme. Fortunately, this is probably the easiest part since the development has been taken care of and filled in. You know where and when your story takes place, and you know enough about the mechanics to organize the theme inside it. You now know what you're writing about (at least mostly) and you know where/when it is. You can make the necessary touch ups so the theme fits what you've decided on as your setting. Next we tackle the characters, this is a bit trickier since you have more decisions to make. You have major and minor characters so you get to answer a few questions about what happens to them and where they fit. If you have a main character or several, who? Do you have sacred cows (characters that absolutely don't die, no matter what)? Does a character start the trouble? Who and are they the villain? Does the trouble start as a result of something outside their control? Does anyone have knowledge of it and how do they handle it? Who makes it to the end and who doesn't? Why/why not?

At this point, you have your stage and plot set up, so you get to have fun playing puppet master and have your characters play out roles through the plot to see who fits what part best. You may even switch characters from minor to major and vice versa, but the point is you get the vitals in there and make sure they're all in the right places.

Who's going to listen depends entirely on you, and how you put together your story. Right now, it's just you but that doesn't make this any less important. You want to start with you because this is your creation and you want it to sound right, so listen up. Beginning, Middle, and End are the standards but, you can mix them up in any fashion you want to. Bear in mind that this may make your story more complicated to tell, but you can still do it as long as you can make sense of it. You've started off with an idea and made it all the way to puppeteering your characters in an exciting world of your own making, congratulations. You've turned those intimidating questions into developed and detailed answers. You've won the show down with the blank screen…there's words now and you have the first draft. Now build on it and expand your idea until it sounds like what you're trying to say because the first ears to hear its voice will be you.

So filling out our story and getting it to being more than a draft and whole lot of notes is what we'll cover in the next article: ***Adding the Muscle: How to fill in the story***

Love to see you there,

Whitney Rines