

It's a jungle out there!



NaNo
For
The
New
And
The
Insane

A NaNoWriMoSM Survival Guide
By Lazette Gifford

NaNo for the New and the Insane

A guide to surviving
NaNoWriMo^(SM)

By Lazette Gifford

Dedicated to all the crazy people who really love NaNoWriMo --
And especially to Chris Baty, who started us all along this insane path!

Please take note:

This book is distributed for free and can be copied to anyone, as long as it is done so as a whole. The articles are copyrighted and cannot be made available on any site or in any print format without my written permission. You do, however, have permission to print the book out for your own use if you like.

Copyright © Lazette Gifford, 2006

Cover Art by Lazette Gifford with Daz Studio and Corel Photo-Paint 9

Some of these articles have appeared in Vision: A Resource for Writers (<http://lazette.net/vision>) or have been part of posts on the NaNo boards and elsewhere.

Table of Contents

Introduction to the Insanity	4
What is this Madness?	5
The First Step in a Crazy Journey	9
How to Go Crazy Once a Year	12
Why I Wrote This Book	14
The NaNo Question for Zette	17
An Interview with Chris Baty,	19
Preparing for NaNo	27
Attitude	28
Challenges	30
Pre-Writing Work and NaNo	33
Outlining for Fun	35
Phase Outlines and NaNo	38
Characters and Other Nuisances	48
The Time and the Place	51
The Last Steps to Getting Ready!	54
Forums, Blogs and Websites	57
Forums are Good -- and Evil	58
Posting Fiction on Open Boards	60
Forward Motion and Other Writing Sites	63
Helpful Sites	65
Goals and Keeping Them	67
The Actual Writing	68
Four Steps for Working up Openings	71
Easy Daily Goals: Moving Ahead with the Story	78
A Different Goal: Moving up the List	82
Almost Random Events	84
Keep Writing to The End	90
Don't Stress	91
Why Do You Bother?	93
It's Not Your Fault If They Quit	98
Prolific Writers and NaNo	100
The After NaNo Blues	104
Writing for Publication -- and the Dread of Editing	105
"It's a dull word," she said	108
Hints from a Small Time Publisher	110
The Question of Publication	113
Just for Fun	116
The Angst of Hero Naming	117
Author versus Character	119
A Few Books on Writing	130

Introduction to the Insanity

For those who haven't heard of NaNo, or aren't certain that they want to get involved, I've put together this collection of a few short articles on the basics. NaNoWriMo is not for every writer, but heading into it with the proper preparation and attitude can make it a great adventure and a lot of fun.

This book covers my personal approach to NaNo and offers ideas, hints, tricks, and thoughts on how to make it through the month. Some of them might help you, and if so, I'm glad I could help.

Many of these sections have been on the NaNo Boards at various times, so they may seem familiar. I've gathered all of this in one place in hopes that it will help some of you.

However, always remember that writers are individuals, and just because I do something one way and have success at it, doesn't mean it's the end-all answer for everyone. You can use my ideas as a guidebook, but in the end you'll have to find your own path.

Also, this is not the same approach as in the wonderful **No Plot, No Problem** book by Chris Baty. It may be that his approach works better for you, and I recommend that everyone who takes part in NaNo buy his book!

What is this Madness?

National Novel Writing Month: <http://www.nanowrimo.org/>

NaNo is an adventure for writers. It is the only event of its kind -- a month when thousands of creative people around the world join together to leap into the joyful chaos of the creative mind as they write novels. There are other dares and challenges, but none like this. The goal is to write at least 50,000 words in 30 days. You have to start with a brand new story -- no working on something already begun. You can have an outline, character worksheets, sketches, and anything else except for any actual writing on the story.

Many people think NaNo is for the person who has never attempted to write anything of this length before. And it is -- but they aren't the only ones who can benefit from this month of madness. I have seen published writers use it to write a quick first draft of something they will later edit to fulfill a contract. I've seen troubled writers use it to force their way past a block and find the joy of creation again.

Everyone should remember the cardinal rule for taking part in NaNo: ***Have fun***. If you think writing a lot of words in a short time sounds enjoyable, then this is something you might want to try.

First let's talk about the people who won't enjoy it. If you hate writing (want to publish a book, don't want to write it), just stay clear of NaNo. The enthusiasm alone will drive

you homicidal when you start reading about all those people who actually love to write and can't wait to get started. If this is your idea of the school assignment from hell, keep a good distance from the site!

If you're convinced the only way to be a true artist is to burn every bit of fiction you created, and to write more words about your **Writer's Block** than you've ever written in fiction, you will swoon at the first day word counts and likely need years of therapy. The sheer joy people have as they head into NaNo November will drive you crazy. Stay clear.

If you think that deathless prose is all that should ever be allowed to be written, and you tend to linger half a day over the proper placement of a comma -- don't even look at the site. You'll froth at the mouth over posts on the boards long before the actual novel writing starts. This is not a site for you. Erase from your mind the mere idea of NaNo and all those writers racing through their novels before your head explodes.

So, what kinds of people are crazy enough to willingly throw themselves into this insanity?

Writers.

Some participants may not know they're writers yet, but they are. Some may not be the type of writer who will do well with the pressure of NaNo, but they're willing to try. A willingness to attempt different things, from new story ideas to new ways to write, is the mark of someone looking beyond the ordinary for this art and inspiration. They're the ones who are going to do well because they'll never settle for the easy answers and

mistake writing angst for talent.

NaNo can be a great help for those who are well into the addiction of writing, and even for those who have sold a few pieces of fiction. NaNo is all about goals and forcing yourself to write without any other constraints. A writer who has a project due to the publisher can find this a great prod to get moving. A writer who is procrastinating on a novel can use the infectious joy and insanity of NaNo to get the first 50,000 words -- or more -- done on their material.

Or a writer might use NaNo to explore a different genre and dedicate the month to try something new. This can be an eye opening experience. Limiting the time you'll allow yourself to *waste* on a project that may not appeal to you can be the deciding factor to try something different.

Writing during NaNo isn't about quantity-versus-quality, as many people seem to think. It's about letting your muse loose to run for a few days and seeing what your imagination can do when it's broken free from the constraints of believing that something has to be perfect the moment it hits the screen. Nothing is ever perfect the first time through, no matter how much you edit as you go. (And people who believe that editing as they go will save them from editing afterwards are almost always disappointed.)

Some people will write good sentences and dialogue on the first draft and some won't -- and it rarely has to do with how fast or slow they write.

Some people put themselves under pressure to compete -- and this is not a

competition. Anyone who joins in and gets more written in November than they normally would is a winner, in my opinion, whether they reach the 50,000 words or not.

NaNo is for anyone who wants to write, no matter if they are a new writer or one already working in the field. All you need is a willingness to leap in and have fun!

The First Step in a Crazy Journey

Once you have signed up for the current year of NaNo one question immediately pops into mind:

Am I crazy?

Well, yes you are. And the odd thing is that people who repeatedly come back to NaNo ask the same question every year, though by the third or fourth year it's sounding rather rhetorical.

You are crazy to join NaNoWriMo. But now that you're here, there is another important question to ask yourself: ***What do I want from NaNo?***

This is more important than you think, and it's the one question many first time NaNo-ers don't think to ask. What is it you want to achieve during the month of November?

This answer comes in three parts, and the first two are givens --

1. I want to have fun.

No one should join NaNo if they don't think it's going to be fun. You can write any time. NaNo is for the crazy people who think writing something this quickly is going to be enjoyable.

2. I want to write 50,000 words (or more) in November.

This is the goal that you signed up for when you joined. Your plan is to write 50,000

words in November.

3. What do I want from NaNo?

This one is the part you get to decide for yourself, and what you choose will help define the way you work. There are three major choices and a lot of lesser ones. The big question is what you expect from the book when you're done.

Writing for the fun of it is a great choice. There is a special subculture of insanity on the NaNo boards that cater especially to this kind of writing and everyone there seems to have a lot of fun. In this choice, you aren't worried about something as simple as the plot! You have dares to take on, challenges, and silly bits of the story to add in!

You might be writing fanfiction (material based on someone else's original work), which can't be published, so you don't have to worry about what you're going to present to a publisher later. Fanfiction has a huge readership and you'll have your own decisions to make based on the world you choose to write in. (But, I am obliged to write, fanfiction is infringing on someone else's copyright and some of these people don't appreciate it.)

Or, the final choice -- the more difficult one -- is that you may want to write something you can later send out as a submission to a publisher. This means that you'll have to have a coherent story -- not necessarily during the month of November, but at sometime after you've edited the book and prepared to send it out. These people have a lot more preparation to do, whether they write outlines or not.

Once you've made a decision on what type of material you intend to write, the rest is easy! You know the general direction you want to go, and the choices each one offers.

There is no wrong choice. Even if what you decide doesn't quite work the way you think, it's all right. NaNoWriMo and November is the chance to experiment. You never know what you're missing if you never try anything new!

Most of the articles in this book will be of help to everyone, no matter what they are writing. There will be some sections aimed specifically at people thinking about publication, however.

How to Go Crazy Once a Year

Imagine yourself as part of the largest collection of writers in one place, nearly all of them excited about their upcoming projects and bubbling over with ideas, plans, and suggestions. You get to talk to them for weeks prior to the starting date and exchange ideas, help out with plot problems, and encourage each other.

Imagine sitting down, waiting for the clock to tick over to 12:01 am November 1st, knowing there are thousands of others who are doing the same thing, and that you are all are part of a huge creative flow that can be found no where else at any time.

If you talk to people who know me, they'll tell you that I'm really crazy all the time, especially where writing is concerned. I write every day and generally average about eight novels, twenty or more short stories, and dozens of articles every year. So, why does someone who writes this much already still look forward to National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo)?

Because it is fun being part of something involving so many writers. In 2003 NaNo had around 25,000 people sign up, and about 3500 made it to the 50,000 word finish line by the end of the month. Many continue to work on their novels throughout the year and diehards hang about the boards throughout the year. Around September there's a definite upswing in posts and interest.

If (like me) you think writing not only can but should be fun, NaNo is a wonderful way to

be silly, have a bit of crazy fun, and get some writing in as well. You can write something silly, you can write something serious; you can go for a straight 50,000 words or go for a completed novel (or two). It doesn't matter. Even if you don't reach the goal of 50,000 words by the end of the month it doesn't matter. No one, including you, is going to die from not writing enough words.

Why I Wrote This Book

<http://lazette.net>

In my real world life -- if you can call it that -- I am a published author, an editor and a publisher. I also run a huge site for writers (www.fmwriters.com) and I've written several nonfiction books on writing.

But that's not why I'm a good choice to write a book on how to tackle NaNo.

I've participated in NaNo since 2001 and completed every year, sometimes spectacularly. I'm a fairly steady writer during the rest of the year, but during NaNo I drop everything (at least for the first week) and do nothing but write. It's my little vacation where I allow myself to do the one thing that I love more than anything else.

Let's look at my track record:

- 2001:
 - Return to Faneh-Thenyal/Fantasy/70,436
- 2002:
 - Freedom and Fame /Fantasy/101,654 (Ebook Sale)
 - Whispers of Winterwood/YA Mystery/75,101
- 2003:
 - Mirrors/Fantasy/72,081 (Small Press Sale)
 - Journey to Winter/fantasy/84,264

- 2004:
 - Singer & St. Jude #2 Bad Connections/SF/106,042 (Ebook Sale)
 - Darkness Falls/SF/84,123
- 2005:
 - Kat among the Pigeons/Urban Fantasy/102,610
 - Feather in the Wind/SF/ 50191
 - The Time and the Place/SF/51,185

In the five years I've participated in NaNo, I've written 797,687 words during the month of November. And I had fun doing it!

Obviously I have the ability to write under the time pressure of NaNo. In fact, I enjoy the rush of the one month deadline. So that's what this booklet is going to be about -- learning to love the fun of NaNo. If you take this month too seriously, you lose the most important aspect of taking part in NaNo -- the pure love of creating stories with no other pressures except the time frame. The stories can be serious, silly, intended for publication or just for you.

Some one once said it's condescending for someone who does well in NaNo to give hints to others. Using a running metaphor, if people are running the same marathon, and some go two miles, but others go to ten, does that mean the people doing ten shouldn't give pointers to the ones doing two miles on how to make the longer run? It doesn't mean the others all want to do more, or that they need to even follow the advice. But not offering help to those who might want it would be self-centered and rude.

This book will offer a few tricks that might help you write more, and enjoy the process.

Take what works for you, and don't worry about the rest.

But mostly, remember to have fun!

The NaNo Question for Zette

I had my moment of NaNo Fame when I was featured on the site in the Question and Answer of the Day section. Here is the question and my longer answer.

"Can you give us any insight on your freakish speed? Is it all in the typing, or do you have a fast brain as well?"

This probably says it all:

"But you are a writing animal. I'd be afraid to get between you and a sheet of blank paper if you had a pen in your hand." -- Timothy Clarke, writing about me in my newsgroup 11/17/99

I like to write. It's both my profession and what I do for enjoyment, and you can't get much luckier than that in life. I can type at almost the same speed as I think, so the trick is to keep thinking in terms of the novel story -- and kill anyone who interrupts me.

My husband stays out of my office while I'm working on my NaNoWriMo novels. Even the cats go on discovery tours of the rest of the house during November. People at the various sites that I run know that unless the entire site has died, I don't want to hear about it. And even then they might be wise to wait until December 1st.

During November I have only one goal: write.

I usually write an outline in October and tape it to the wall beside my desk. During

November I mark off each section as I work through it. Outlines are like cue cards. They jog the memory and keep the story moving along without having to stop and wonder what to do next.

Actually, there is one very important facet to writing fast that most people don't consider: You have to love what you're doing. If you aren't enthralled with telling the story, you'll start looking for other things to do, and then you're doomed.

The trick -- the real trick -- is to sit down and write. Don't talk about writing, don't sit down and write posts about writing -- and don't look to others to make you write. Just get in there and do it.

It also helps to board up the doors and tear out the phone, but some people may find that excessive.

Good luck to everyone this year and have fun.

An Interview with Chris Baty,

NaNoWriMo Madness: The Man Behind the Curtain

Interview by Lazette Gifford

This interview was originally published in 2003 in [Vision: A Resource for Writers](#)

Chris Baty has been both idolized and vilified for starting NaNoWriMo -- National Novel Writing Month, a thirty day writing frenzy that seizes thousands of people around the world. Each November (and for a couple months before) the writers converge on www.nanowrimo.org and begin their hopeful rush toward... well, writing a hell of a lot of words in a very short time.

Some come armed with extensive outlines, and others start only with a vague idea of what writing a story even entails. Some come hoping to write the minimum number of words needed to 'win' and others start out intending to write an entire novel. Many people from both groups fall short of the goal of 50,000 words, but that doesn't diminish the fun of joining in with thousands of others on the starting line at midnight, November 1.

Other people have claimed that anyone who joins NaNoWriMo can't be a real writer, that we are flooding the world with horrible manuscripts, and that apparently we should all be taken out back to the wall and shot rather than allowed to continue this travesty.

But it's all great fun and anyone who doesn't 'get' that part is maybe taking writing -- and probably life -- a little too seriously. No, NaNo will not turn out thousands of ready to

publish novels -- but it has helped many people work their way past the fear of writing, and allowed others to run wild for an entire month without fear of their inner critic telling them they're not taking this seriously enough.

And it's fun. That's the part the detractors really don't get. If you can't have fun writing, it's just another job. NaNoWriMo isn't for everyone. However, joining in isn't going to ruin you as a writer anymore than joining in the Boston Marathon would ruin a person for jogging.

Even as this interview hits the Internet, the 2003 NaNoWriMo will be getting underway. It's not too late to join the insanity fun. Come over to the boards and ask how we're doing. Just don't expect anyone there to be truly coherent for the month of November...

So, what does the man who started this think of it all?

Vision: Are you a writer, or is this something you just wanted to inflict on people who annoyed you in school or something?

Chris: Ha! Well, I'm a freelance writer by trade, covering music, travel and culture for various publications. Before starting NaNoWriMo, though, I didn't do any fiction writing. I had always loved to read novels, but I never felt talented enough to actually try to create one of my own. Discovering that you can have fun writing novels even if you're not particularly gifted at it was a real "eureka!" moment for me.

Vision: Did you think it would become this popular?

Chris: Never in my wildest dreams. The second year, when we had 140 people sign up, I was astounded. I was sure it was going to be a dwindling turn-out from there.

Vision: Do you have any idea how many words the participants of NaNoWriMo amass on their manuscripts during November?

Chris: It's hard to say. We had about 2100 winners last year. If you assume all of them wrote 50,001 words and then collapsed, that alone is over 105,000,000 words. Combined with the output of the other 12000 participants, I would say 150,000,000 words is a safe estimate.

Vision: Do you see any particular genre as being more popular than others?

Chris: Not so much. I know sci-fi and fantasy are both popular. Because I don't get to read anyone's novels apart from my friends', so I think I have a skewed notion of what people are writing. From my end, it looks like everyone is writing vaguely autobiographical, character-driven fiction about people who have just turned 30 and are still confused about what they want to be when they grow up. I've gotten emails from people though, asking if NaNoWriMo is only for romance writers. So I think there's a real diversity there.

Vision: Do you participate in NaNoWriMo?

Chris: I've done it every year since 1999, amassing four deeply mediocre manuscripts along the way. One of the nice things about leading NaNoWriMo is the fact that I HAVE to write a book each year or feel like a dismal failure as a program director.

Vision: What has most surprised you about the people who join?

Chris: I've been really surprised and delighted by how supportive Wrimos are of one another. I feel like NaNoWriMo is a really unique writing community, because we are, for better or worse, deeply uncritical. It's all about just losing yourself into the creative process; the book that results from it all is almost irrelevant. Because of that, there's a lot of energetic support in the air during November. You can see it on the message boards. Someone will write in saying they're exhausted and are thinking about giving up, and five total strangers will write back and cheer them back to their computer. It's really wonderful to watch.

Vision: What do you think of all the spin-offs that are using the NaNo name to expand on the idea -- NaNo Edit, NaNo Year, etc?

Chris: Anything that provides people a structured opportunity to be creative is a good thing in my book. We could all use more deadlines that encourage us to make neat stuff.

Vision: Do you know of anyone who has participated in every NaNo since it

started in 1999?

Chris: I think there are four of us who have won each year. We're all stubborn as mules at this point, and will likely write a NaNo novel every year until carpal tunnel kills us.

Vision: How much does it cost to run NaNoWriMo each year, and how much of that is funded by contributions? (And when and where can people contribute?)

Chris: This year we're looking at \$35,885 in non-recoupable expenses, and another \$24,900 in recoupable costs (like t-shirts). The financing of NaNo has gotten a little more tricky as the costs of the event have grown. Since I don't want to charge an entry fee and I'm dead set against taking ads, we depend on participant contributions (about 70% of the budget) and t-shirt sales (about 30% of the budget) to make ends meet. We have a \$10 suggested donation for all participants, and make about \$3 in profit per t-shirt (which goes right back into the organization). NaNoWriMo participants are a generous, thoughtful lot, and raising the money for the budget each year usually happens without too much browbeating on my part. ;) If people want to help support us, they can find our PayPal link and mailing address at <http://www.nanowrimo.org/index.php?s=4>

Vision: NaNo Writers seem to live in many different countries. Have some of those places surprised you? Where do the majority of NaNo people appear to be?

Chris: I think reading the announcement for a NaNo Thank God It's Over Party that was being held in a South African national park was the most "oh my god,

this thing has gotten out of hand" moment.

The majority of participants, though, live in the US, Canada, and UK.

Vision: People who attend intensive writing camps like Clarion often claim it's a life-changing experience. A few have even given up writing. What do you hear from people who have participated in NaNoWriMo?

Chris: I think people come away from NaNoWriMo feeling really excited about writing. We've had some people get so inspired by what happens to them in November that they quit their jobs and head back to school to study fiction. For most people, though, the effects are less dramatic. Participants tend to feel more confident afterwards, and are more ready to risk trying their hands at other projects. Giving yourself permission to write horribly is a really liberating process. It immediately turns off that stultifying, self-critical voice that has a way of dooming creative undertakings.

Mostly, people come away from NaNo realizing that writing can be more fun if you stop trying to get it perfect on the first go-round. You can get it perfect in the rewrite. The first draft is all about making wonderful messes.

Vision: What would you wish for the people who join NaNoWriMo this November?

Chris: I hope that everyone gives themselves enough time to see the project through. I tell everyone that if they set aside two hours a night, five nights a week, the book will write itself. People who give up because they don't think

things are going well in Week Two are going to miss out on the amazing breakthroughs that always happen in Week Three. So my wish is that people give it time, and stay disciplined about writing, even when it becomes exhausting and tedious. It will get better. And nothing compares to that feeling of crossing the 50,000 word mark.

Vision: Any words of wisdom for hopeful NaNoWriMo people this year, like how to deal with crazed family members, unsympathetic bosses, and neglected pets -- not to mention how to get those words written?

Chris: I tell everyone to send out an email to everyone they know before starting, explaining that they're taking part in this crazy writing escapade and that they're looking for at least one other person to write with them. Having someone in your area to write with makes the whole experience so much more fun, and will end up keeping both writers on track when the going gets tough. If you REALLY want to stay on track, get a sibling to do it with you. Nothing brings out those (very helpful) competitive urges like gloating calls from a sister or brother saying they wrote 4,000 words the previous night.

Vision: What do you do with the rest of your year?

Chris: The months around NaNo are so hectic for me that I usually spend January just reconnecting with friends who I haven't seen since September. And hanging out with my long-suffering girlfriend, Elly, (who does an admirable job of tolerating all the distracted nights I spend at the computer in autumn). I also start

the freelance writing work again, writing CD reviews and working on guidebooks to various cities. Mostly, though, I spend time telling myself that I really need to get started on my novel rewrite. ;)

Preparing for NaNo

You've signed up for NaNo in October, or you've been thinking about it for several months -- and yet, somehow, November 1st still seems to sneak up on you!

Getting ready for the month of November is an important first step for doing well in NaNo. This means more than doing some pre-work for the manuscript!

Attitude

NaNo can be frightening the first time you consider the idea, especially if you aren't used to writing on a regular schedule. That doesn't mean you can't do it, however. You just have to be in the right frame of mind.

And that frame of mind is to ***embrace the insanity***. Step outside the norm for writers, who are often told to take their time, think through everything, don't rush the story -- and that's good advice, most of the time. However, for NaNo you have to do the opposite. You have to be willing to let your muse run free for an entire month and see what you can write.

This also means you need to give up your expectations of producing a great piece of literature. It might turn out to be just that -- but this isn't what you're trying to achieve. You are trying to write 50,000 words in 30 days. Some of you will write a story that meanders everywhere and has no coherent plots. You'll use the forum boards to take up challenges and adding weirdness into your story, and you'll have a great time.

Others, however, will want to tell a story they have imagined in their heads already, and perhaps try to create something they will eventually submit to publishers. They'll take a more structured approach to NaNo and have at least part of their story idea worked out before November 1.

You do not need to complete the 50,000 words in order to enjoy NaNo. It's the goal, but that doesn't always mean you are the type of writer who is going to have fun writing that

many words in so short a time. There is nothing wrong with learning the forced word count aspect of NaNo isn't for you. Writers come in all kinds. It doesn't mean you can't still enjoy NaNoWriMo, though. It all depends on your attitude. What motivates a person to do something so insane?

For NaNo first-timers the lure is usually just to find out if they can write a novel. Many who join have never written anything that long, let alone in a single month. After they've signed up their moods general range from 'let's get going!' to 'what the hell have I done?'

The odd thing is that's usually the same reaction the next year... and the year after that....

NaNo isn't about proving anything. It isn't about writing the great novel, or about perfection. It isn't, even, about winning. It's about enjoying the act of writing just for itself and letting yourself fly for a whole month without worrying about anything else. It's about joining in the only intellectual activity of its kind along with thousands of others from around the world.

For some people it has rekindled the joy of writing they'd lost somewhere along the way. For a few professionals who join in it's either a way to get a good push on a new novel they have under contract, or the chance to write something just for themselves.

I'm going to have fun during November. While the weather turns cold and the leaves fall off all the trees, and everything looks bleak and dreary, I'm going to be typing away in my office working on a novel -- or maybe two.

Challenges

Everyone here has something that challenges them as a writer. For many it will be the basics -- which we've all had to face at some time. This can include everything from trying to decide how and when to write, to the best way to name characters and how to decide on a title. All of it can be difficult the first few times. After you manage those you face the more difficult decisions -- Fanfiction or original? Erotica or romance? Point of view? How many words per day? How many days per week?

All of us have to face these questions in one form or another. Some will answer the problems instinctively and not worry. Others will linger over these details because the answer is not obvious for them.

But everyone has something that is a challenge for them as a writer, and will make NaNo difficult on some level. It might be just making yourself believe that your story is worth writing, and that one is the hardest to overcome. But here is a little truth: ***All stories are worth writing.*** No, they won't all be perfect. Who cares? No story is perfect. None of them are perfect, no matter how well-lauded or award-winning they might be. For every word of praise about the perfection of some piece of fiction you will also find someone who disliked it and lists all the flaws. You cannot please everyone, so write the story that you want and enjoy.

Also, a first draft story is apt to be less perfect than others, but it doesn't matter. The first draft is just to get the storyline down so that you can look at it and decide what didn't

work or why. After you've written, it you can decide if you want to fix it or not, or if just learning from the experience is enough and you'll do better on the next one.

And you will do better. If you are willing to learn, you will write better from one manuscript to the next. Like any other art, *you learn from doing* with writing. You can read all the writing books in the world, attend classes, and hang out at on-line writing sites, but until you apply yourself to the writing, you will not learn what it really means.

I can't make you believe that your writing is important, but it is. Everyone who has that urge to create a world in words is a storyteller, and that's an aspect of your world that is often overlooked. It's your creativity, and it's your gift, and you deserve to have some fun with it.

You might not make the 50,000 words in November, but that doesn't matter. This is for you, and you don't have to prove yourself to anyone. All you need do is let your creativity and imagination have some fun for a few days. You may decide that writing so much in one month isn't for you. You may find that you don't like writing at all, and would rather keep the stories in your head. But the only way to find out is to give it a try.

There is no failing at NaNo. At worst, you learn something about yourself.

Many of you know that actually writing words is not a challenge for me, but that doesn't mean it isn't difficult to get to that point where I can write the words. I know from experience that I do best if I have my story idea neatly laid out, so that I can glance at a line in an outline and know what it is I'm going to do next. If I had to stop and think about 'what next' and 'oh that didn't work, better get rid of it' then I wouldn't do as well. This is

how I work, and I've learned it by facing the challenges, which deal mostly with limited time and not curbing my imagination so that stories get away from me.

So my challenges have to do mostly with the pre-work and arranging for a few days of vacation from my other jobs. I, obviously, must get a viable outline down or I'll flounder on those few free days I have to really fly with the story. I don't get to do this very often, and in these last weeks before NaNo I start worrying about everything from my basic story premise and whether I'll like the characters enough to whether I can get enough other work done in time to do a real rush of words in the first few days.

Yes, I will write a lot more than 50,000 words in November -- at least if all goes well. But that's part of my challenge -- to see if I can turn out a decent first draft during NaNo. It's not easy, but the challenge makes it more fun for me. Staying focused now, while I'm trying to get everything else caught up, is hard. I know that I keep losing threads in my outline, and it drives me crazy as I move things from one point to another and then back again, trying to fit bits and pieces in. I have notes in paper notebooks, on scraps of paper, on my PDA and in various files on my computer. Getting it all organized is a challenge all on its own.

Doing NaNo is not easy. No writing of this kind is, no matter how many words you end up doing.

Face your challenges and don't get scared off by them!

Pre-Writing Work and NaNo

The official NaNoWriMo rules say you can do any amount of pre-work you like, but you cannot actually start the story before November 1. This means you can't continue working on a novel you've already begun and legitimately count it for NaNo. Many people still do write on not-new material, and most participants don't mind as long as you admit to it -- and don't lie about the word count of what you've actually written during NaNo.

But if you want to really have the best experience at NaNo, you should follow the rules and try to write something totally new for November. Have some good ideas of what you are going to write, although that doesn't always mean an extensive amount of background material. A story alive in your head, with characters clamoring to get out and have an adventure, is far more important than any amount of pre-work you do.

Preparation isn't just about what to write, though. I spend the last week of October making certain I've done all the nagging little other-work things that absolutely have to be done and that would drag me out of writing. I always find time to write anyway, but I like it better when I don't feel like I have something else that has to be done right now.

Students would be wise to look ahead and see if there is anything on their schedule that they can do ahead of time. It's not always possible to clear those obligations, and it's important to remember that NaNo is not more important than school work.

There are two groups of writers who go into the November madness. One group

refuses to even think of characters before they start. Sometimes after midnight on November 1st, they sit down and start writing whatever comes to their head. It's fun to work that way, but if you are not the type who can keep coming up with ideas, especially under pressure, you might want to take a little time to work out some plot points for the story you are going to write.

Prepare yourself. In the next section I'm going to talk about outlines!

Outlining for Fun

If you intend to write a book that is not based on random material from the boards, I encourage you to write at least a simple outline for their NaNo novel. An easy outline is to list of 30 points in your story that can be written in about 2,000 word clumps. You only need 1,667 words per day to reach 50,000. If you have 30 things and write one each day, you'll reach your goal. It's that simple.

In some cases you may write more on one of your points and find yourself ahead of the game, which is also good. If you think your novel is going to be more than 50,000 words (which is really too short for most publications) you can either work toward the 50,000 that month and finish the novel later, or you can try to write the entire novel that month. Aiming at a novel of 90k, for instance, will take 3,000 words per day.

Some people write detailed outlines for NaNo. For my first NaNo book each November (yes, I usually do more than one that month), I almost always use a very detailed outline. For the second I have either a very short outline or none at all.

The big trick with NaNo is not to get stuck. If you have no idea what to do next, you are in real danger of stopping completely and with the time constraints, you may not have enough time to get started again. NaNo requires momentum to make it through the entire month.

And always remember, NaNo or not, a first draft is just that -- and writers need to remember they can rework, change, add, and delete at will after they write it. The first

draft is a wonderful tool that many new writers don't appreciate. It means we get to tell the stories in a way that flows for us, and worry about the technicalities of making it presentable later.

I use different types of outlines for various projects -- whatever strikes me at the time. The format of the outline is not as important as getting a few notes down. Sometimes I'll write a couple lines per chapter (*Feather in the Wind* was like that), other times I'll write out a line or two for each step of action, and maybe throw in reminders of dialogue that I don't want to forget, along with worldbuilding notes and reminders to stress things. The outline for *Kat among the Pigeons* was closer to that kind of outline.

An outline doesn't mean one of those silly things they force people to write in school. You can use that format, of course, if you like it... but I know people who outline on notecards so they can move pieces around without any trouble, and people who use post it notes in much the same way. What they write in the outline also varies according to what helps them move the book along.

All professional novel writers have to learn to outline in one form or another. Once you hit the big times you no longer write a book and try to sell it; instead you write a synopsis, which is just an outline of a story you want to write, written in paragraph format. Agents and publishers decide, based on the synopsis, whether or not they want to buy the book. This saves professional writers the trouble of spending months on a book that might not sell. When that's the way you're making your income, you can't afford to waste time on something no one wants.

An outline isn't a set-in-stone tool, either. It's just a map. You use it to see where you want to go, and if you find something interesting that's not quite on the *map* you move off and explore for a while. However, with an outline you still have the map to get back to so you know what you need before the end.

Phase Outlines and NaNo

This is a reworked version of my article *It's Just a Phase* from *Vision: A Resource for Writers*.

I've also tried several different types of outlining for NaNo. I've even written without a net -- no outline at all -- and enjoyed it a great deal. However, I've found that having at least a basic outline helps me move through the story without the long pauses trying to parse together the next moves. Those pauses don't work during the NaNo Month.

A few years ago I started a new type of outlining I've called the Phase System. It helped me write *Kat among the Pigeons* -- 102,610 words -- in ten days. Because of the amount of detail in the phase-outline, I wrote 10,000 words a day without ever having to pause or fret over *does this work* or *what comes next* problems.

The phase-outline for that particular novel ran over 10,000 words. I can see many of you wincing. An outline that long? Isn't that a waste of time and energy? It depends on what you get out of it in the end. Every one of those 10,000 gained me about eleven words in the novel's first draft. The two weeks I spent writing out the phase-outline cut the time I wrote the novel from about fifty-five days (at an average of two thousand words a day -- about where I write under normal circumstances) to eleven days. Even adding the fourteen days it took to write the outline, that's still forty days less than it would have taken me normally.

Yes, I write quickly anyway, and fifty-five days is not a bad length of time to write a

novel... except it would have taken me longer. Without the detailed phase-outline, I would have hit difficult spots that required me to sit back and think the actions out a little more carefully. I would have had to back-track the story now and then when something didn't work quite right. I know this because I've faced that sort of problem with other novels, both 'flying without a net' ones and ones using shorter outlines.

So, do you want an outline that will take you straight through the story without worry? Never mind the speed at which you write it -- that doesn't matter. This is about organization and plotting.

Okay, so what exactly is this method?

Phases are written out as key phrases that will bring the action into focus. A phase can be clues to dialogue, if that's what the section's focus is centered around, or it might be a little bit of description, or a set of actions... anything that will make the story move another few hundred words.

Usually a 'phase' will only run from twenty to fifty words in the outline. For instance, this is an example from Gathering (Book 7 of the Dark Staff series -- and this is first draft with only a little touch up).

Phase Outline section:

1. Tristan in the room aboard the ship, resting, thinking about going home, feeling the world changing. It feels like traveling between realities, without any of the work. (28 words)

These few words translated to this:

Going somewhere else...

Tristan rested on the soft bed, feeling out the ship around him and the power beyond it. The metal shell moved through the same space where he and Abby had traveled so often before. Each time they had slipped from one reality to another, leaving friends behind.

Their quest had come at such a cost to them that sometimes he wondered if the Goddess really understood the needs of flesh and blood, whether human or elf. He wondered what she expected, in the end. Did she understand what she asked of her son, and what he paid that she could never give back?

Or could she? They were going... home this time.

He pushed that thought away as quickly as it came.

He could feel the magic brushing against the craft, whispering through the walls and calling to him with a seductive offer of power that he knew, from experience, he could not wholly control. Dangerous power, a dangerous passage... he had never fully understood this place that stood between realities.

The one thing he did know, however, was that this was far less work. He could rest this time, he and Abby both, before they...

He shivered a little.

Tristan?

Abby, somewhere else on the ship, had felt his worry surge up through the crowns.

I'm all right. (222 words)

Here is something more from later in the book (Phases 196 and 197):

196. Voices call him back. Mother -- What the hell is that? Get your bows ready! Praise Gods for her. She never wavered, never panicked. Kills the creature. Lehan? Open the door. Takes a moment, and then the door flies open and he is knocked back. (46 words)

197. Wounded! Not bad. Bad enough to put you down! You knocked me down. Didn't have to kick the door open. What was that? Anyone know? No one does. Others take bows and torches to scout the trail near the village, but not far before light. (46 words)

And here is what those two phases became:

Lehan closed his eyes, trying to get his wits back, trying to think of something helpful he could do. The world wanted to slip away from him. He held on, even if his mind wasn't working quite well. He needed calm. He needed to do this right, because he wasn't going to get yet another chance --

And then he heard sounds that gave him hope: Voices, and one in particular that won a smile from him even now.

"What the hell is that!" Elliora shouted. "Give me that bow!"

Gods praise his mother. She never wavered, never panicked. He heard the creature shouting but the bow twanged a moment later. It bellowed again, and another twang. He heard it fall, slide down, and hit the ground outside.

Safe.

"Lehan, I assume you're in there?"

"Yes," he said, almost breathless.

She tried the door. "Put the bar up. Let me in."

He had to put the sword down, and he fell against the door, managing to do little more than gasp at the pain. Getting the bar up proved far more difficult than it had been to put it down... but it finally slid off and clattered on the floor.

He hadn't time to step back before the door flew open and knocked him down. (215)

"You're wounded!"

He had not seen his mother worried like that before. She tossed the bow aside and dropped to her knees, her face pale in the torchlight the others had brought to the open door.

"It's not that bad," Lehan insisted, though his voice slurred a little more than he would have liked just then. He didn't want to be weak in view of the townspeople. He had never trusted them much.

"It's bad enough to put you down," she said, shaking her head and gently pulling at the bloody cloth at his shoulder.

"You --" He stopped and caught his breath. "You put me down, mother. You could have given me a chance to back away before you kicked the door open."

"Ah." She took cloth someone offered with a nod of thanks. "My apologies. I panicked. What was that creature?"

"I have no idea. But Liora met me on the trail and warned me that something was wrong." He kept the other part to himself just then, but he thought his mother could see more in his eyes. "If she hadn't I wouldn't have been on guard and gotten away from it."

"Have any of you ever seen or heard of such a creature?" Elliora asked, looking out toward the door.

No one had, and they didn't sound any happier about it, either. A few had taken out their bows and looked worriedly toward the dark hills. Lehan saw them as his mother helped him up. (250)

Note the color changed when I went to a new phase. This is to help with the word-counting part of the writing. I look at what I think the novel's length should be and try to work within those parameters. For instance, a young adult mystery might only run 60,000 words. If I have 300 phases written out, then I only need 200 words per phase.

On the other hand, if I'm writing a space opera, I know that I'll likely need the final word count to be at least 125,000 words. If I've only written out 300 phases, that would mean

about 417 words per phase. In a case like that, I would likely go back through the phase outline and start looking for areas to expand. If I can add another 100 phases, then I only need 312 or so words per phase. If I can get the number of phases up to 500, then I only need 250 words per phase. This can be a real help during NaNo, where you can look at writing short pieces and making headway on the story. Obviously for NaNo most of you will want to reach 50,000 words. Here is how this might break out for you:

- 60 Phases in the outline -- 834 words per phase -- 2 phase sections per day
- 120 Phases in the outline -- 417 words per phase -- 4 phase sections per day
- 150 Phases in the outline -- 334 words per phase -- 5 phase sections per day
- 300 Phases in the outline -- 167 words per phase -- 10 phase sections per day

Phases rarely ever come out at the exact word count assigned to them. If you assign a lower word count than you expect to do, you're more likely to go over what you need, and that's good from a morale point of view. It will help you move on to the next phase. I've had 200 word phases go to over 1000 words, and I've had some come in at less than 100 words. Don't make your story line fit to the phase word count, though if it is short you might consider adding some details.

When you write out a phase in the outline, get key words and actions into the line. Then let your mind flow to where the character/story would go next. Write it out. If it doesn't work, erase it and try again. Drop in descriptions and clues to dialogue.

Don't worry about grammar, perfection of prose, or any other 'story' related problems for

the outline. When I work in phases like this, all I'm concerned about is the story's forward movement, and the crisis points. It helps; in fact, to write down what you think will be the turning points of the story before you start the outline. Yes, think that far ahead. Where does the story start? What major conflict do you imagine? Where will it end? These are things anyone starting a novel should at least consider in passing before they start. They don't have to be set-in-stone answers. Endings, for instance, are notoriously flexible. You might have started off with an 'everyone dies' scenario in mind, but a study of the market shows those types of stories are very hard to sell. Readers invest time in characters, and they often feel short-changed and annoyed when they die at the end. So, as you near the last section, you might find yourself modifying that original ending.

Do this sort of modifying, and any other, in the phase-outline before you start writing. Once you start writing, don't stop and second-guess your outline. You might rewrite sections of it during novel editing, but right now you have this story to write, not the one your mind starts playing with as soon as you commit to writing.

You might -- as I have from time to time -- find that some phases need to be cut, or others need to be added in. Do it. Don't worry about it. What looks clear-cut during the outlining phases sometimes shows a few holes later. Adding and subtracting is fine in limitation. Just don't rewrite the entire outline.

During NaNo I divide the phases up by days to give myself a set number to do. I list everything out in a Microsoft Excel worksheet. Ten phases of 200 words each is 2000 words. A story can move forward very quickly that way.

DAY	PHASE	NEED	DID	DIFFERENCE
1	1	200	221	21
.
.
15	196	200	215	15
.	197	200	250	50

If you have had trouble sticking to a story, or making it all the way to the end, this might help. Try it, adapt it to your own style of work, and see what happens. A few years ago I never wrote with an outline. Today I find myself as anxious to start a new outline as I am to start a new book. You never know when you might find something new that works for you.

I've found that no matter how detailed I make my outline, I end up writing something different in the actual book. Sometimes it's important to remember a good or crucial line, though, and jotting it down is helpful.

On the other hand, if you are just doing this for fun, it's not going to matter to you. This is one of those types of outlines that really tend to help people who are interested in the mechanics of the story as much as the word count. Some people will find it utterly and completely useless for what they want to do with NaNo.

To be honest, I tend to fall somewhere between the two extremes. I have used a full Phase Outline more than once, but I often use something a bit less detailed. Having the 'points' numbered is probably the most important part for me, as well as having an idea of how many total words I want to write, so that I can try to get close to the proper

number of words per section. It's always interesting to see how much the story deviates from what I thought it would be in the planning phase.

Characters and Other Nuisances

For most writers, plots and characters arrive as a package deal. An imagined event sparks a scene, often with someone affected by the actions of another -- and there they are -- hero and villain. Okay, sometimes it's hard to tell which is which at first glance, but they still exist.

Often these are only shadows at first glance, and may need a little fleshing out before you start writing. This is where you can put your ***waiting-for-NaNo-isn't-it-November 1-yet!*** time to good use. Making out character sheets can be fun. They also have a wonderful way of sparking new story ideas.

Making a list of character descriptions, and keeping them on hand (like tacked to the wall by your computer) will help when you can't remember if a character has green eyes or grey eyes, and keep you from guessing and getting the details wrong. While you might have your main character firmly nailed in your mind, those lesser characters can be a real pain when you try to sort them out.

Since I'm a character-driven writer, the vision of the character is generally the first part of the story I see. However, even a character-driven writer can use lists like the one below to not only keep track of the people, but to spark some ideas.

1. Name
2. Human/humanoid/other
3. Gender and sexual preferences

4. Skin type
5. Eyes
6. Facial features
7. Height
8. Weight
9. Blemishes
10. Culturally related marks (tattoos, etc.)
11. Scars (from injury -- and how does this affect the person?)
12. Senses (sight and hearing)
13. Personality (Extrovert, introvert, etc.)
14. Profession/Training
15. Status (Current position in society)
16. Family (Large Family, small? Relationship with others in family)
17. Family Wealth (Did the character grow up poor, rich)
18. Major changes (What drastic changes in life affected this character?)
19. Fears , Phobias and Traits
20. Weaknesses and Flaws (Everyone has a weakness)
21. Relationships (Friends, lovers, coworkers, neighbors)
22. Goals (What does your character want to achieve?)

There are many other things you can add in, from hobbies to favorite shows and music. However, just remember that doing the fill-in-the-blanks method of character creation can give you a bunch of grocery store list characters who are basically interchangeable because they are only lists. You have to make the characters real in your writing, and

not rely just on a list to bring them to life.

If you find you've created characters you don't need, be sure to save them away in some file or notebook. The same goes for any other plot-related tidbits you decide you can't use. You may still find them helpful in the future!

Some people also enjoy drawing pictures of their characters. If this idea appeals to you, then the months before November is the time to do the work -- and not during NaNo when you should be writing. The same is true for map making and all those other odd diversions writers find to keep from actually writing.

Make your pictures, your maps, charts, outlines and all the other pre-work well ahead of time if you can. This will be of great help if you get part way into the pre-work to a novel and find that the story isn't working for you. You'll still have time to work up another one. Don't throw the first away, though! Hold on to anything of this sort, because sometimes the answer to what looks like a problem you'll never fix can suddenly appear out of nowhere. Sometimes all you need is a little distance.

The Time and the Place

Many of you are going to face time management issues during November. The best advice I can give you is to write at the first opportunity you get, rather than leaving it for the last thing on your daily list. That doesn't mean to do it instead of things like school work and house cleaning, but do write before you kick on instant messenger or hit the NaNo boards. The later it gets, the more tired you'll be, and it's harder to write when your brain is no longer willing to work hard and only wants sleep.

Some people find it worthwhile to get up half an hour early and write at least a couple hundred words before starting on the rest of the day. This can be helpful if you find it difficult to write 1667 words at one time.

Others take the cramming for word count approach. They don't write everyday and intend to do most, or all, of the work on the weekends. This means writing about 6000 words every Saturday and Sunday of the month. It's not impossible, but it can be subject to unforeseen problems -- one weekend of socializing instead of writing, and it's nearly impossible to make that work back up.

Writing everyday isn't always practical, either. Write when you can, and if you are on a roll, go over the amount you need. There will likely be days when you don't quite write enough, and you can make up those amounts with little trouble as long as you don't let the amount you need build up too high.

Sometimes the difficulty in writing isn't so much finding the time as locating a place

where you can work without too many interruptions. This is also something to consider before the start of NaNo. Unless you live in a house full of authors, chances are that the people closest to you are not going to understand your obsession -- either for NaNo or any other writing.

You can try to explain the situation to the people you live with. Sometimes they're understanding and even encouraging. Often, though, non-writers just don't get it. In fact, there are enough writers who don't understand the lure of NaNoWriMo that chances are you're going to have to find another way around the problem.

One answer is something I've already mentioned -- plan on getting up earlier than usual and writing then. If you get up before everyone else, this can usually work. Waiting for everyone to go to bed before you write is a recipe for disaster, though. Again, you'll write better and faster if you aren't already drained from a day of work. And besides, someone will decide to stay up to watch that all night monster movie marathon and screw up your writing schedule.

Another answer is to spend some time at the library writing. Yes, really, the library. Many of these places have computers and you can often either print or email the material to yourself. The library also provides a great place for quick answers to questions about settings, creatures, and other oddities that pop up.

Writers almost always require some degree of privacy to work. I find it impossible to work in a room with the TV on because I start typing out the dialogue from the show, which somehow infiltrates into my brain.

Like many writers, I have music that I enjoy and that sometimes helps me type. Headphones and a CD player can block out nearly all distractions and allow you to focus on the story -- as long as you aren't focusing on the music instead.

Preparing by finding the right time and place to work can save all kinds of frustration later, but it's still no guarantee that you'll make it through the full 50,000 words of NaNo. Sometimes no amount of preparation will see you through the entire amount -- but that's all right. This is just fun. Don't let it become anything more and you can enjoy it, no matter how many words you write!

The Last Steps to Getting Ready!

As the last days of October wind down, you should have an idea of what you want to write about no later than October 20th, complete with outline, character notes, and in depth worldbuilding. Get it all set up, study it.

Then completely scrap the idea at 11:55pm October 31st and at 12:01 am November 1st start NaNo with something you just thought of five minutes ago.

Having failed with the 'overall plan' approach (see above) try at least to have an idea of what you are going to write about each day when you sit down to work. One way to do this is to have the (no it's not really an outline-- don't think of it as an outline!) list on hand. There are 30 days in November. Jot down 30 things to write about. These things must be interesting enough to get you through 1667 words a day. Try to make them at least coherent and linked in some way:

November 1: Mary and Bob run into each other in the grocery store. Compare prices of different sizes of eggs. Eggs and breast sizes. Sex.

November 2: Mary and Bob run into each other at the car wash. Talk about car sizes. Sex.

November 3: Just sex.

November 4: Hell, even I'm tired of the sex by now. Don't they know anyone else? Mary sits in the window of her apartment staring out across the courtyard

toward the other building. No hold it. What are those two doing in that window....?

November 5: Mary talks to her husband David about... about... no.....

November 6: Introduce Mary's boss. She works at a book store. She spends most of the day shelving books and trying to sell books to people who are really just looking for directions to the nearest bathroom. She finds out her boss is having an affair.

November 7: Mary's daughter does homework with her friend, Tom. Long discussion about social equality. There will be no sex. Sit on opposite sides of the table and hands must remain in plain sight at all times!

(Etc.)

There. One week done. That wasn't so hard.

It is, really, perfectly all right to have a true outline. They can keep you moving when you couldn't come up with a story to save your life (odd phrase -- there might be a story in that...Oh. Scheherazade. Arabian Nights. Already been done, hasn't it?).

Or you can 'fly without a net' and let your characters lead you along the path without a clue of where you're going. This is a dangerous way to work when you are under a time constraint, however. Characters have a horrible habit of going on strike at the wrong moment. If that is the case, threaten to abandon them and tell the story about their lost dog instead. If they don't listen, think Lassie.

The final trick to going crazy for NaNoWriMo is to sit down at your computer and let yourself write. Don't worry about perfection. Don't worry about reaching 50,000 words. You are not here to prove anything to anyone. It doesn't matter who writes more or who has a 'real' book while you're stringing together silly stuff. If you can let yourself go and write you're going to be a winner.

A word of caution, though: Once you learn how much fun writing really is, you're not going to want to limit it to November and a mere 50,000 words!

Here are some last pointers that can help out, though:

Once November starts, don't write more on the NaNo boards than you do in your novel. You'll start comparing word counts and that leads to serious bouts of head-against-wall incidents.

Be prepared with various bribes to get family members to leave you alone. Money, candy, promises to clean the cat litter box for all of December -- whatever it takes.

If you are in the US, don't expect to spend all Thanksgiving writing because family and friends get very pissy on holidays where they expect you to join in -- or worse, where you might have been expected to bake that turkey or some other such thing. You can consider moving the computer to the kitchen counter and typing in words with one hand while you mix dressing with the other. Do try to focus on the food when you're dicing that onion though. It can get messy otherwise, and a trip to ER will just take more time out of writing.

Forums, Blogs and Websites

They are seductive... those wonderful sites (like the NaNo Boards) that draw you away from your writing. They can be helpful -- but there are things to know about the Internet and writing. Knowing a few facts can save you all kinds of trouble in the future and help you make wise decisions now.

Forums are Good -- and Evil

NaNo is an Internet event, and as such we should all take advantage of the forums and outside material in whatever way suits us. But there are pitfalls to working on the Internet.

The forums at NaNoWriMo represent a wonderful resource, as long as you don't get sucked into the quagmire and find yourself writing more in posts than you do in their story. The companionship of NaNo is one of the big draws, and talking to other people about writing -- something usually lacking in face-to-face situations -- is an addictive pursuit for people starved for that sort of conversation.

You can even the writing and posting out by not spend more time writing about writing than actually working on your story. One way in which to use the allure of the forums is to give yourself a word count goal before you can read or post on your favorite NaNo board. Many people have used this method to motivate themselves to write just a little more each day.

The forums are very good if you suddenly find yourself stuck and need a clue on what to do next. You can use the 'take a dare' method of writing -- there are always dares going at NaNo! -- or you can ask specific questions. During the month of November there are almost always people on the site, and someone might just have the answer you need!

Quite a few years ago, a friend challenged me to the-very-first-ever word war. We met in the Forward Motion Chat room and wrote for half an hour to see who could write the

most in that amount of time. Both of us had been lagging on our writing, and the little adrenaline push worked wonderfully. Since then, Word Wars have spread throughout writing communities and are very popular. In a Word War, no one loses since everyone ends up with more words than they would have had if they hadn't taken part -- a couple hundred words or a couple thousand, it doesn't matter.

There are often Word Wars listed on the NaNo boards and we often have impromptu ones at Forward Motion. They're fun, short intense ways to get some writing done when you haven't much time.

Posting how well you've done at the end of the day is also a great boost, and a good incentive to do as well the next day. Sometimes being able to encourage and help others can also help with your attitude toward NaNo writing.

Use the boards wisely and they can help you reach your goals -- but don't let yourself get pulled into the boards and forums and forget the real reason you joined!

Posting Fiction on Open Boards

For many of you this will have no bearing at all on your work or what you do with it. If you are writing fanfiction, or not in the least bit interested in a writing career, then you can post anywhere you like and not worry.

Others, who think they might want sell their NaNo novel (or anything else they've written) to a publisher, need to know that posting a story on an open site on the Internet is the same as publishing it. You have thrown away your First Print Rights, which are the ones that the publishers want.

Many people put their stories up on sites in the mistaken belief that if they aren't paid for them, they aren't published. This isn't true. Anything that is in a position where it can be read by the public is considered published. This includes posting on your website, LiveJournal, Blog, or any site where just anyone passing through can read the work. It doesn't matter how many people actually read the story, either.

Sites that are safe, however, are ones in which the reader needs a password in order to get to the story. Most writers' sites with critique groups are set up in this way. 'Friends Only' LiveJournals are also safe because the owner has full control over who sees the posts.

One thing that you have to look out for, however, is a site where the Terms of Service (TOS) says that they have the right to use anything on their server or boards in anyway

that they wish. They are basically assuming the copyright. For most people this won't matter, but it never hurts for writers to be aware of such statements.

Copyright, by the way, almost always stays with the writer. Even when you publish a story or novel, the copyright stays in the author's name. (Look on the other side of the title page and you'll usually see the copyright notice. Most often it will have the author's name unless they are writing in something like a Star Wars series or work based on a game, etc.)

If a site says not to worry because they don't take copyright and it stays with the author - well, that's good, but it still doesn't change that the material is published. Some people don't realize the difference between copyright and first publication rights. Copyright is automatically given to the author from the moment the work is created. First publication rights are kind of like 'leasing' the story out to someone else to drive around and show for a while. Those people most often want to be the very first people to show the shiny new story. Sometimes you will sell secondary print rights, but those are usually in an anthology and pay less.

Publishers are not just being picky when they turn down stories that have been on open boards on the Internet. Consider all the book-related lawsuits you've read about lately. There is a real threat of the person submitting the story not being the real author. Even on the website I run we've had a case of someone posting material and claiming it as her own when it wasn't. No publisher wants to accept a story and then find the books sitting in a warehouse somewhere while lawyers fight out who really wrote it. Even if you are the author, chances are in a case like that you will have to prove it in court.

Can you afford the lawyers?

Protect the stories you hope to sell.

Posting snippets of the story for others to read is fine. You might even post an entire chapter. Some people say not more than 10 percent of the entire novel should ever be posted, but I think that number is flexible.

So just be aware of what you're doing and make a knowledgeable decision based on it. Knowing the choices is better than being unaware of what you are risking.

Forward Motion and Other Writing Sites

There are many helpful sites for writers on line. Some of them focus on various aspects of writing, and others are more open. I run a large site called Forward Motion. We concentrate on writing for publication, which means there is no fanfiction writing on the site and we don't encourage self-publication. However, we do have many members who do both -- just not at the site.

Every year at Forward Motion we have boards for NaNo and a chat room dedicated to NaNo people, so that the more sedate writers don't go crazy listening to us. Many writing sites embrace NaNo for the month of insanity, but they go beyond concentrating on writing in November.

Sites away from NaNo can give you a better look at the writing world as a whole. NaNo is an odd event for writers, and many of us spend the rest of the year working more sedately and with far less of the insanity. If you are (for instance) interested in what it takes to be published, how to write a query letter, how to approach agents, then a site like Forward Motion will be a good addition to your list of writing sites.

Remember that you can belong to as many as you like, although there is a point where you can find yourself giving more to the various sites than you get in return. One site's focus often differs from that of another, and you may find that you flitter between one and another. Critters is a great site for getting and giving critiques, for instance, and has a wonderful record for seeing members published. Absolute Write is another good

site, focusing on technical aspects of writing.

Some sites have chat rooms which are both helpful and addictive.

If you are interested in the world of writing, you might want to look into find a site or two that suits you. Having the company of authors can be a great help when you are looking for inspiration and the answers to questions.

Helpful Sites

With NaNoWriMo starting, many people will be frantic for everything from names to story ideas for their work. Here are a number of links that might help people during the NaNo madness -- and they might even be helpful at other, less stressful times!

The Seventh Sanctum has a number of story idea generators:

<http://www.seventhsanctum.com/index.php>

Marion Webster Dictionary on-line.

<http://www.m-w.com>

A generator for City names. Kind of fun!

<http://www.geocities.com/terrormartyr/boe/citynames.html>

Or maybe you need to know the location for something in the real world?

<http://www.mapquest.com>

Well, not everyone needs to find out information on patron saints, but you never know....

<http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/indexsnt.htm>

Fairy Tale generator. Interesting idea...

<http://www.macrowerx.com/~jfusion/ftg/>

The Skyview Café... a wonderful site to find out if there is (or was) a full moon on a certain night, or maybe find out the exact time the sun will rise on a certain date in a certain area... very nice!

<http://www.skyviewcafe.com/index.php>

Need to see what a certain gun looks like? Try this one!

<http://www.securityarms.com/20010315/all.htm>

Links to all kinds of calendar type things. Helpful if you're using a non Julian dating system.

<http://calendarhome.com/>

How about the Bureau of Labor Statistics? You never know when a few odd facts and figures might help!

<http://www.bls.gov/home.htm>

Quotes by authors -- these might help keep you going when you realize you're not alone!

<http://www.quoteland.com/author.asp>

Goals and Keeping Them

Once you start writing in November things get... interesting.

All writers have goals, even if they don't think of them in that way. The one goal that unites us is to finish the story we're working on -- because, even though many writers don't complete the story, that's not their intention when they start.

NaNo can help you with the art of reaching goals, whether that's to write an entire 50,000 words in 30 days or to write an entire novel in however long it takes you to do the work!

The Actual Writing

November 1st arrives. It's time to get started. 1667 words a day is all you need to write to reach 50,000 words by 11:59 PM on November 30th.

Some of you will suddenly look at that number and panic, especially if you aren't used to writing on any kind of regular schedule. It's really not as hard as it looks if you just get used to it.

One thing you can do is to write half of it in the morning and half at night. If you do 850 words at each sitting, you'll have more than you need. Or divide it into thirds or quarters -- write a few hundred words at a time and add them all up at the end of the day.

Don't second guess your words as you write them. You can edit, change, delete and throw out anything you want -- after November. During November you are not allowed to delete any of your writing. It doesn't matter if your story starts meandering off into meaningless dribble because you're too tired to think straight -- leave it. Pick up with a saner storyline the next day. Don't even look at what you wrote before.

Do not edit while you write.

You know that internal editor you're always complaining about? The one who won't let you write anything without tearing apart?

That's you. Get over it. There is no person in your head controlling you, and you can turn that voice off for the month of November and see if you can get something done --

because an internal editor who stops you from finishing anything is just your way of making sure you'll fail. It's you. Trust me on this one because I've dealt with it on a personal level, though I've been lucky and dealt with the problem before it got out of hand. However, I've seen many promising writers use the 'internal editor' excuse as a reason not to finish anything.

If you want to write the book, then write it. The editor is there for later, when you really do need to look at the work and make sure it sparkles. But first you have to write it, because no amount of editing as you go will help if you never finish.

Back up your work!

Every year there are anguished screams as people lose their story to a failed hard drive. Back up your work. Email it to a friend, if you need to. Do this at least every couple days, if not every day.

Don't Start Over

If you're only a day or two into NaNo, you can usually safely scrap the start of your book and start over, at least if you think you can make up the word count. A week into it and you're hitting dodgy ground.

If you find that you really don't like the story you're writing then have the current characters meet the new characters, and the new characters take over and start a new adventure. Yeah, it's silly -- but there is no reason to drop all that writing, not in the case of NaNo. No, it won't be a coherent book or something you can sell in that format.

But if you are interested in publication later, you can hack off the first part, rework the opening, and make it into a better story.

But for NaNo -- just keep going!

Four Steps for Working up Openings

(Another article from Vision: A Resource for Writers, slightly reworked for NaNo)

Sometimes the first steps in starting a novel are the hardest. Deciding where to begin is one of the hardest parts of being a writer. The biggest trick to a successful opening is not to stress over it when you actually begin your story.

Whatever your story is about, you need to bring the reader into the proper state of mind for the story to be effective. Here is the real question: what do you want the first impression of your story to be? This is an important question. It will set the mood for the reader, and even if the story suddenly takes a surprise twist, you still need to have a very clear idea of how you want to drag the reader in.

There are, I think, four considerations when looking at the opening to a story. An opening might use one or more of these pieces of information, and figuring out what they are before you start can be helpful.

Where

What is your setting? How much of the world can you -- and need you -- bring alive in those first few paragraphs? Is it important that readers ground themselves in the world right away, or is it more important that they focus on the who or what aspects?

Who

Who is the focus of your story, or at least this part of it? Is it important that the reader

know this person right away, or is it more important that they have a feel for a strange place or a clue to what is going on? This can also include emotional input, since emotion is apparent in a character's actions.

What

Is it the action of the story that needs to be brought into focus right from the start? Are there events that are more important to the story than where or who?

Dialogue

Who is the first person to speak, and why? What important information does that first line convey? It might be information about attitude or it might be information about events -- but either way, it should have especial significance to your story.

One of these four will most often be the focus of your opening. Some also enhance style or theme, but those are things that can and should be worked into any of the openings listed above. There are likely other possible aspects, but it is usually one of these four, or a combination of them, that will give your readers the view that you want them to have.

And this really is important to know. What is the first thing you want your readers to see? And what 'story question' does it set up that the reader will want answered by the end of the book? Readers are, by their very nature, curious people. They come in asking 'Why?' That may be very quickly followed by 'What does it mean?'

As writers we see our world, we know what's going on, and we know what we think is

the most important thing that the reader sees. In one of my novels I was certain that the first part of the story should focus on my main character being kidnapped by slavers and seeing his village in flames as they sail away. Amazingly, when the editor cut the first 8k words of the novel, and started just before the second major incident in the character's life, it worked far better. The original 8k worked in as back story (not flashback) as the character told people how he had come to be a slave. How he reacted to the loss of his village became more important than seeing the loss.

Some problems you may face:

If you have to explain your opening by using a flashback in the first few pages, then you are almost certainly starting the novel at the wrong place.

If you start your story so far back in your character's life that nothing is really going to happen until several chapters into the story, then you have started in the wrong place.

You cannot start the novel with an exciting incident that really has nothing to do with the story.

Here is a trick that can help you get started straight into the action. We, as humans, are conditioned to believe history. If you have something outrageous that you want to be accepted as a premise for your book, then set it up as part of a historical event:

On Monday the fourth person was killed by a falling meteorite.

Mentally, the reader is conditioned to accept that there have already been three. It's

part of history, it's a fact. The reader is going to want to know why and how, but he's not likely to start out skeptical as he would be if you started with the first person hit by a meteorite.

Here are examples of how the four different openings might work for a story:

Where

Darkness came, dispersed only by the haloed golden glow of street lights purposely shaped to lend an old-fashioned air to the tourist area. Tendrils of fog, like the ghosts of the murdered women, wound their way up through the boardwalk leading out into the lake, and small waves brushed against the underside by the moored skiffs, occasionally sending them bouncing against each other. Nothing else moved but the breeze, picking up the faint scent of dead fish, as it swept through the fog ghosts and past the food shacks and trinket shops, lately boarded up. The tourist season had ended early.

Who

Michael sat in the second story window of the cheap hotel and watched the boardwalk. He adjusted the chair again and finally gave up, accepting (as he had every night this week) that it would sag to the right. The usual bag of potato chips had been replaced by a bowl of celery and the six pack of sodas by a thermos of tea.

Outside the window a thin fog had rolled in, obscuring some of the view; not a

good night for a stakeout on an important case. He dared not miss anything. Even the governor had his eye on the situation -- though he was worried more about the drop in tax revenue from tourists than the dead women.

Or maybe Michael had just gotten cynical after five years on the force. It was possible, after all, that the governor actually cared about both. Just not enough to provide any more funds for the case. After all, he had those missing revenues to worry about, too.

What

The first murdered woman had washed up midmorning on a Sunday, the body stretched out on the lake shore just a few yards from the boardwalk where she had been last seen. Mary Nelson, a bright-eyed, sassy waitress at the Fish Net, hadn't been dead for more than a few hours, and those who knew her shook their heads in shock. It had to have been an accident....

A week later by a pair of tourists, two college women come to spend a few days at the resort before heading back to the campus, turned up dead just a little farther down the shore. The next one came only a day later; another local girl. Leslie hadn't even graduated from high school yet.

Four murders in less than two weeks, all of them linked to the boardwalk area, all of them found washed up on the shore, though none had drowned. The little town of Stewart's Wake had finally made it big time, CNN and all.

Dialogue

"Ready to roll," Cassie said, her voice tinny in the earplug.

Michael leaned closer to the window, binoculars up to his eyes. The boardwalk looked deserted except for the woman who came from the small fish shop nearly to the end. He saw her grab the barrel that served for a sign and roll it in, whistling tunelessly to herself.

Michael tapped the mike at his shoulder. "Too bold, Cassie. Look scared."

"I am fu-" She stopped and caught herself, plainly remembering they were on an open line, others listening in. "I am scared."

"Slow down. Take your time locking that door."

She gave a little grunt of reply and through the binoculars he could see her drop the keys.

"That's a little obvious, too."

"I didn't do it on purpose."

What I have here are four views of the same scene. They can be mixed and matched (though with edits to make them flow better), some discarded or all used in the order I wrote them. If each one is read separately, they produce a slightly different feel of the situation. If they're read in order, they produce an overall vision, with the opening (where) a little out of sync with the rest, but, in my opinion, the most interesting of the

four.

If you are having trouble getting started on November 1, try one of these four approaches. Then don't look back -- just get moving and keep moving. If you want, you can rework the opening in December, but for now the trick is to start writing and continue to the end of November.

Good luck!

Easy Daily Goals: Moving Ahead with the Story

Here is a trick that will help you move ahead a little at a time. Those little bits of progress can really help!

Look at your story and where it is. Now write out four things on a slip of paper that would be the next four steps in your story. Make them relatively small steps, something like this:

1. Sally gets up and goes to school.
2. In class she learns that her favorite teacher is leaving to go hunt butterflies in the Amazon.
3. Sally is depressed for the rest of the day, and even her friends comment on it.
4. Sally goes home and helps make dinner.

Those are the four things that you are going to write about today. If you write 450 words on each of those steps, you will have done more than you need to do for the day to stay on track. ($450 \times 4 = 1800$). If you do 500 words, then you will have 2000 words for the day.

Doing 450 words on one of those sections won't be that difficult if you keep the idea of adding detail in mind:

1. Sally rolled over beneath the warm comforter and frowned at the alarm clock. It would go off in less than five minutes. Why couldn't she have slept for those last few minutes, instead of staring at it, dreading each second ticking away, watching the second hand go around and around and knowing what it meant?

Maybe she could pretend that she hadn't turned it on. Maybe she could reach out and hit it off right now before it began to ring and --

And it went off just as her hand snaked out from under the covers. She yelped in surprise despite herself and hit the button on the top, then snaked her arm back in, burrowing down into the covers. Sally hated mornings. She didn't mind school so much these days -- high school had proved to be marginally better than anything that came before -- but she hated the entire concept of getting up and facing the world. Or facing her brothers, and her always cheery father --

"Rise and shine, sunshine!" her father said, hitting the door as he went past.

She growled some answer, but he was used to that by now. And there was no use waiting any longer. If she did, one of the boys would come in and grab the bathroom that she shared with her mother and father. And then she'd have to wait, and that only made mornings even worse.

By the time she'd dressed, combed out her short brown hair -- wishing for streaks, or dye, or something to make it look less mousy -- and dabbed a little makeup on, she was very nearly too late for breakfast. She didn't mind. Eating with the trolls, otherwise known as her four brothers, had never been a favorite

pastime, especially in the mornings when they all acted as though they'd forgotten their manners between sunset and sunrise. She wondered how they made it through the day without someone just locking them up in closets somewhere.

"Good morning, Sunshine," her father smiled as she came into the room. No matter how often she winced, he never got the hint that maybe she was too old for that nick name now. "You're almost too late for breakfast. You know you shouldn't go to school without a good healthy breakfast to help stimulate the brain."

"Yeah dad, I know," Sally said. She gave a nod of thanks to her mother who handed her a plate with an egg, some toast and a couple slices of bacon.

"That can't be enough to eat! You need a real meal --"

"I have gym first period this year," I reminded him again. We'd gone through this nearly every morning for the last two weeks since school started up. "It's not a good idea to eat too much before that. I'll have a good lunch, though."

"Oh, that's right."

Sometimes Sally thought her life must be on repeats.

There. That's 491 words. The trick is just to let it flow and not worry about if the lines are right, or if it makes a lot of sense. Try to get the feel of what your character is doing, and you can add all kinds of interesting little asides.

When you finish with your four points for the day -- and you can do them one at a time, at different times during the day, so you can have lots of breaks between -- then write up four more for the next day. You'll be ready to go first thing.

Or, better still, write out eight lines for a day. At eight things all you have to write is 200 words per section. You'd be surprised how easy that can be.

This isn't so much outlining as giving yourself a few prompts on what you want to do next. Even just one or two will help to get you started each day.

Then try to concentrate on writing words. Don't worry if they're good words. Writers are blessed with a gift called the second draft. Nothing has to be -- or ever is -- perfect in the first draft. The first draft is just to get the story line down and to experiment with as many different things as you want, without worrying about it. You never know what might work.

Mostly, though, have fun!

A Different Goal: Moving up the List

This is a tip I read on the boards a few years ago, so I will not take credit for it, but it is well worth repeating. Many people have found it helpful!

Go to the page that allows you to search through all the participants. Search by Word Count and Descending, but leave everything else blank. It may take you a few minutes going through the pages to track yourself down. There are a lot of us here!

Once you have found your spot, look at the person who has the next highest word count above you. You have to beat that number by one or two words to move up the list. Once you do, check the next one and write that amount.

Quite often there will be a lot of people very close in numbers, so it's going to be easy to move up several steps at once.

You can leave the page open and hit refresh after updating the word count in another page. That way you don't have to go hunt for your name again and can see how far up the list you've moved.

This is really a nice easy way to give yourself a goal without getting into the word count situation if that one doesn't work for you.

There are variations of this goal setting. One is to add in a location factor in your initial search so you can see how you're doing against others in your area. Moving upward in

the list is fun and gives you a sense of accomplishment, as long as you don't let yourself become overwhelmed by the idea that there are others higher up the list from you. Someone is always going to write more than you do. I'm an extremely fast and steady writer, but I know a couple authors who outpace me every year.

The goal isn't to write the most. It's to write to your own challenges.

And have fun!

Almost Random Events

A story should rarely, of course, have truly random events thrown in. Some forms of literary fiction may do all right in that respect, but most fiction needs a control of chaos of events, not the creation of it.

However, sometimes a little something unexpected can liven up a spot where you are just not sure what to do next. This often happens at the end of one phase and before the next big step. Transitions... how to get from one spot to another? Sometimes it seems as though the story just comes to a dead stop. Holly Lisle says to throw in naked women with machine guns. Others say alligators. However, all you really need is an obstacle for your characters to overcome -- a challenge to get them moving again, and still interesting to the reader. Characters in motion tend to stay that way if they have something interesting to do.

But once again, remember that the obstacle cannot be truly random. It has to fit into your story in some way, and overcoming it has to bring your character closer to a goal -- or at least appear to in some way, even if it turns out to be a blind alley.

One of the ways to come up with random events is to have a not-so-random list ready to take you over the hurdles. Sometimes even when an author outlines, she can still hit a point in the story where things grind to a halt and there seems no way to move on to the next step. There is no current conflict, and a story is about conflict.

There are two answers at this point. The first is to jump the transition and get to the

next scene:

Four days later they stood at the door to the lair.

But maybe you don't want them to get there that quickly. Maybe your story still needs a bit more conflict to develop the characters, or a few more adventures along the way to fill out a novel length story. Perhaps all you need is a bit of random thought to get you moving on the next idea.

So here is how to create some. And if you do the preliminary work before you even outline, you might find that this helps you fill in a few spots as you go along. The first trick is to recognize a spot where you are stuck. There are a couple different types of stuck:

1. Don't know what to do next.
2. Don't know how to get to the next step.

In the case of #1, this exercise might at least get your mind moving along the right path, even if you decide not to use what you get out of it. Knowing what won't work can often lead to deciding what can.

In the second case, you need to be a little more careful and decide if you have a transition that needs to be filled, or a spot that you need to skip to get to the action again. Filling in spots with needless clutter does not always help the story. Balance is the hard part.

On the other hand, you can always write the scene and take it out later if you feel it

really doesn't work. It's as important to get the writer moving as it is the story, and if coming up with something that you discard during editing is the key to keeping going, then jump in. You never know what might help.

So here is the very simple way to do it:

First you make a list of six types of trouble that could affect your story, based on the basics of your plot and your characters. Maybe you will write vampire attack for an event in a dark fantasy. Or perhaps you will have a systems failure for an sf story or a magical attack for a disaster in a fantasy. The trick is to list out things that could happen in your story.

The list below might be used for a generic modern day adventure of some sort.

1. Transportation Trouble

- a. Break down/Sabotage
- b. Theft
- c. Road/trail destruction

2. Weather

- a. Rain
- b. Drought
- c. Flood

3. People

- a. Neighbor
- b. Relative
- c. Authority

4. Accident

- a. Main Character
- b. Stranger
- c. Friend/relative

5. Enemy

- a. Hunting MC
- b. Accidentally crossing paths
- c. Minion of enemy

6. Disaster

- a. Earthquake
- b. Flood
- c. Fire

Use two six sided dice, preferably of different colors, or throw one at a time. The first throw chooses the general type of disaster (1-6), the second chooses the specifics (a=1 or 2, b=3 or 4, c=5 or 6).

So, how does that help? Well, let's say the list above is to a story about a cop who has been on the case of a serial killer. The last point in the story says she has just gotten home from the latest murder scene. She has a new clue, but doesn't know how it fits. She will have another new clue at the next murder scene... but that won't be for a few days.

You need her to do something in the meantime. Something that appears random, but --

So you throw the dice... #4 is Accident, and b for Stranger.

So...

The cop is home. She's pondering what the new clue in the case means. She's thinking about going to work in the morning and playing with the computers. Then she hears a crash outside her apartment -- and looks to see two cars smashed into each other. She calls it in, and then, cursing, goes down to the street...

Only the accident isn't an accident, exactly. One of the cars was driven by the serial killer who knows that the cop has gotten close to the truth. The killer needed to draw her out of the building and her padlocked apartment, with the security cams in the halls.

And now that she's on the street... well?

As you can see, this is not totally random. It's just a way to trick your writing brain into looking at a new scenario and fitting it into the story. Sometimes the idea just will not work. Roll the dice again.

Creating 'random' events will not work for every writer. But sometimes they can be just the key to move your story forward rather than to let it languish.

One last thought: If you are someone with role playing games around, you likely have a number of dice of various types. I used six-sided because they are the most likely to be on hand in most houses. However, I have twenty-sided, hundred-sided, etc. You can make out far more extensive 'random' lists than mine. The trick, though, is to make certain that the things listed remain true to your story's setting.

This is not a replacement for plotting. A novel with nothing but random encounters isn't a story -- it's just a list of events. However, those encounters might just help you move past that dead spot in the outline or the story writing. Sometimes a nudge is all we really need.

Keep Writing to The End

You're going to hit a point during the month of November where it all seems overwhelming. We all hit that point, but many of us press through and finish. You can do it too!

And there are going to be times when some of you will face problems created by the bad attitudes of others, both in real life and on the boards. Being prepared for those moments can help lessen the shock.

Don't Stress

Here's the thing to remember, people....

It's only words. Good words, bad words, lots or a few -- it's only words. It's not going to change your life one way or another. You might learn something about your writing from NaNo, but you'll still have to apply it to work outside of this crazed month. During NaNo... it's just words.

I suspect some people like stress because I've seen some who will stress over anything and everything. Maybe it's an adrenaline rush, or even a craving for sympathy from others. But if you don't fall under either of those two categories, and you are still finding yourself stressing over this month's activities, sit back and think it over. All you are doing is putting some words down. No one is going to judge you by those words. A month from now no one is going to be talking much about NaNo. A year from now no one will remember what you did, even here on the boards.

There are plenty of real life things to stress about like work, school and family problems -- but don't make NaNo into another one. This is where you can write, stress free and just for the fun of it.

Maybe a certain amount of stress -- the push to keep going -- is natural. But that's not the kind of stress I'm talking about. Each year I see posts on the NaNo boards by truly upset, frantic people because they aren't doing as well as they hoped. I've even had a couple emails from some of people. I keep trying to tell them, to remind them, that this is

for fun. There are a lot of truly bad things in everyone's life, but this isn't one of them. You don't need to fret over it. Just get in there and do the challenge at the level that is a challenge for you.

Why Do You Bother?

Every year, usually just a few days after the November madness of NaNo really gets going, I inevitably get hit by a series of rude posts and emails demanding why I've joined NaNo since writing 50,000 words in a month is obviously not a problem for me.

They're right in one respect: 50k worth of writing is a bad month for me. I write every day and I have for years, so I'm quite good at putting words down on the screen. My mind is tuned to dropping into stories, and I rarely have trouble writing. It's my love and obsession.

When I started writing (back in the dark ages), however, I was lucky to get 25,000 words in a year. Everyone has to start somewhere, and I built my ability to write like this over the years. I did it because I love to write and I have too many stories to tell. I don't have time to waste.

Many of you are just starting out in writing. You're leaping into the deep end on your first try (or at least early in your writing) and doing what I would never have dreamed of attempting back when I started. I thought writing 500 words a day was really a stretch back then. It was difficult.

And some of you will do well, even on your first try. Sadly, you'll likely be faced with the same posts and notes about how you've ruined NaNo for others. **It's not true.**

NaNoWriMo isn't only about 50,000 words: That's just a goal. The real NaNo is the

madness, the people, the camaraderie -- and for me it is also about writing an entire novel in one month. 50,000 words is not a full novel in most cases. The publishers I am trying to sell to want submissions in the 90 to 120k range. So for me National *NOVEL* Writing Month has become just that -- a chance to write an entire new novel in one month -- or two novels, if I get the chance.

Some of you will find that you want to do the same thing. It doesn't matter if I write more words than some of the rest of you, or if you write more than some other people. As long as you are having fun -- and even if you don't make the 50k mark -- it doesn't matter what I am doing.

I enjoy doing a great rush of writing in the first days of NaNo. I try very hard to clear everything else from my usual work, and I apply myself only to the NaNo novel for a few days. It's not, as some people suppose, that I don't have a job, but rather that my work is flexible enough to allow me a few days of vacation for fun. And this is fun for me.

Some people are not able to adjust their work and family obligations, but I have the kind of jobs where if I work very hard in October, I can have a half dozen free days at the start of November. I also have a husband who, when I said I wasn't certain I would do NaNo this year, berated me for not doing the one thing that I have such fun at each year.

So, along with having already taught myself to write at just about any time or place, I am also lucky to be able to clear the time and have a husband who supports me -- and brings me Taco Bell food.

So why don't I just do this on my own at other times? Sometimes I do. But it's not nearly as much fun as sitting at 11:59pm on October 31st, waiting for that minute to click over and knowing there are thousands of others who are going to be leaping in at midnight as well -- and that the next day when I get up there will be thousands more. All of us writing novels at the same time -- it's an amazing, wonderful feeling to be part of such group insanity!

NaNo isn't just about the word count. In fact, in some ways the 50k number is the least important part of this process. NaNo is about being part of something writing-related that is world-wide. It's about the NaNo boards and the fun and insane stuff posted there. It's about asking questions, and challenging yourself to do something maybe you always wanted to do, but didn't have the push to try.

So here we all are. It's going to be another fun year. Just remember that we each have our own reasons for being here, and while mine may be slightly more insane than some of the rest of you, it doesn't make me any less a part of NaNo.

No matter how much you write for NaNo, someone will ask you the question: Why do you bother? People who don't write at all are going to shake their heads in disbelief, and sometimes derision, when you tell them you're going to take part in NaNo. When they ask why you're wasting your time, ask them this:

Do you watch hours of television? Do you spend Saturday afternoons at football games? Do you go to bars and drink? (Or whatever variation you can think of.) And if you do, what good does it do you?

Why do you bother?

Or is it that you do it because you enjoy some aspect of it -- the entertainment of the television, the excitement of the football, and camaraderie of joining friends at the bar? You aren't gaining anything in your life by doing any of the above. There are people who will tell you that you are just wasting your time, in fact.

Writing is no different. It doesn't have to have some great, important reason. It never has. Many people have written because they enjoyed it from the start. In fact, the book that is often cited as the first fiction novel, *The Tales of Genji*, was written by a bored Japanese noblewoman called Murasaki Shikibu (who is named after a character in the novel). Greater calling, was it?

Writing is about creativity in the same way that drawing, painting, creating music and any other art form is. Not everyone does it for money, not everyone does it well, and not everyone is going to make it a greater calling and dedicate their life to it. It's about self-expression. For some reason a number of people seem to think that writing has to be an elite, higher calling to which only the most dedicated, cut-your-wrists-and-write-in-your-own-blood few can join. There's a little poison part of our society that says if you are having fun, it's not work; if it's not work, it's not worth anything -- and the people who believe this are the ones who will tell you that NaNo is useless.

Because they don't get it...because it's not fun to them. But we're not all the same, and I would be bored to tears at a football game.

Everyone here has a story to write. Some will write better than others. A few will go on

to be published, and some will just write for themselves and friends. Others will get a week or so into November, throw out all their pens and paper and decide that it's just not for them.

So what? Until you try, you won't know. And if joining in the joyous, silly NaNoWriMo romp for 50k words in 30 days sounds like fun to you... well, it's better than sitting at the bar for those 30 days, don't you think? There is no other event like NaNoWriMo for writers. For one month out of the year -- for a few hours a day during that month -- you get to be part of it, joining in with thousands of others. The rest of the year you are, more or less, on your own again. If you have fun here, great. If it's not for you, move along. There are plenty of others hanging around -- you really won't be missed. It's just not for you.

The rest of us are having fun, creating stories, and not worried about whether the guy at the next computer is worthy to put his words down on the screen or not. Write just for the joy of it -- good or bad doesn't mean a thing. This is for you, and don't let anyone else tell you that you shouldn't bother.

It's Not Your Fault If They Quit

I've seen it happen every year in NaNo -- people who are upset by what other people are doing aren't going to be content about their own work, and they'll find a reason to stop and drop out -- and make sure someone who is doing well knows that it's his fault. So they post to the boards about how others ruined NaNo for them by posting high word counts and they don't see any reason to go on.

They want someone to blame, but it isn't anyone's fault -- not even their own.

They're not ready for NaNo, or it's just not the kind of thing they find fun. However, rather than admit the truth, it's easier for them to say -- and believe -- that it's someone else's fault for doing well, and making them look bad.

Do you think they face the rest of life that way? How far do you think someone would get with that kind of attitude: *I'm not going to run any more because someone, somewhere -- whom I don't even know -- ran a mile farther than me!*

Of course that's not going to work.

So don't let someone tell you that they're quitting NaNo because you wrote more than them. Don't stop posting their word counts and leave the boards because someone was in a bad mood and decided that if they weren't having fun they'd ruin it for as many others as possible. This is a schoolyard mentality, and the only way it works here is if the people still having fun let it.

If you do decide to stop, at least admit to yourself that it's because you want to or even have to because of time constraints. But don't blame some other writer.

Prolific Writers and NaNo

Someone out there is going to write more words than you do. Get used to the idea and understand that it's not important to what you are doing. There are many prolific writers in the world, and some of them are even good writers. I am prolific. I write well, though I'm always working on improvement. One of the things I learned very early in my career was that a person learns to write better by writing -- not by talking about writing, or thinking about writing, or anything else that takes the place of putting words down on a page. I took this to heart, and I write as often as I can.

There are several prolific writers who take part in NaNo. Some people seem to think this is evil and shouldn't be allowed. They seem to think NaNo is about writing 50,000 words -- not about writing in a way that pushes your limits, no matter what those limits might be.

In 2005 I wrote a little over 200,000 words for the November NaNo. It came in three books, one of which was good, a second that needs work, and a third that I did just for me. It was extremely hard work to write that many words. And it was a lot of fun.

There is nothing wrong with writing more than 50,000 words during NaNo. There's nothing wrong with writing less than 50,000 either. People have different levels that are their limits, and mine happens to be high.

NaNo is a wonderful opportunity to write an entire novel if you happen to have the ability to push yourself through the work.

Before you decide that someone who happens to have a lot of words obviously can't write because it has to be crap at that speed, read the author's excerpt or snippets if they have them on line. You might be surprised to find that some people can still write a decent story, even if they do write quickly. Not that it's required that the story be good. But don't make judgment calls without knowing what you're judging. And even if it is crap -- who cares?

Writing speed and writing quality have nothing to do with each other. Get used to that fact.

So how do I write 10,000 words a day during the first few days of NaNo? (I've done this several years in a row!)

1. Good outline.
2. Four hours a night that I might otherwise have spent reading, watching some show, or writing something else.
3. A husband who not only encourages me to push myself sometimes, but bakes me cookies to cheer me up.
4. Writing 3,000 words an hour when I really get on a roll.
5. Pushing myself to write more with the challenge of NaNo than I normally would.
6. And truly loving writing, so it's something I want to do, even when it's not NaNo.

But even so, a week of 10k a day was all I could manage before real work kicked back in and I am dropping back to smaller word count days for a while.

However, if you're working as hard as you want to work, or pushing yourself as hard as

you can (whichever you prefer to do -- both are fine!), then we're on the same level. The word count doesn't mean anything except that I can keep a story flowing in my head longer and I type faster.

If you aren't already, there may come a day when you find yourself writing more than you ever thought you could, and you'll suddenly find people accusing you of being *prolific*. It's a wonderful feeling to know that you may have time to tell all the stories in your head after all!

Here's a collection of a few funny lines for prolific writers to help you along.

The first one:

Another damned thick, square book! Always scribble, scribble, scribble! Eh! Mr. Gibbon? -- William Henry, Duke of Gloucester, upon receiving volume II of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (1781)

The second one:

Georges Simenon produced 75 Maigret novels and 23 short stories, publishing on average 2.5 new works per year.

On "Front Row", the BBC Radio 4 arts programme this evening, the presenter told a story about Noel Coward having phoned Simenon.

Apparently Coward said "May I speak to M. Simenon?"

"I'm sorry; he's working on a Maigret novel."

"I can hold until he's finished."

And a last, personal favorite, for obvious reasons:

But you are a writing animal. I'd be afraid to get between you and a sheet of blank paper if you had a pen in your hand. -- Timothy Clarke, writing about me in my newsgroup

11/17/99

The After NaNo Blues

NaNo will be over before you know it. Many of the people will stop frequenting the boards, and you'll start out December 1st uncertain of what you're going to do with your time.

Don't worry! There's still plenty to do!

Writing for Publication -- and the Dread of Editing

I'm a working author with a number of short story publications as well as a few novels in both print and electronic formats. I take my writing seriously, but that doesn't mean I make it unnecessarily difficult. Serious writing does not have to be hard. It doesn't even have to be perfect, especially in the first draft, which is what you're writing for NaNo. Once you accept the joy of first draft writing, you open up yourself to the chance of writing a number of marginal stories that may not be perfect -- but may well be the best stories to write. They just will take more work than others.

You do not have to be a *serious* writer to take part in NaNo. In fact, many hobby writers work just as hard as those who want to pursue publication, even though they may be working on something like fanfiction. NaNo is for all writers, and anyone can enjoy it, no matter what their later intentions may be.

Some NaNo participants will write a story they later hope to sell -- so that means being serious in what we choose to write. Usually they won't play around with the dares, or anything else that makes a random story. Those of us who go this type of novel will miss out on the silly fun stuff, but we have our own paths, and we'll enjoy them in our own way.

This is going to be a first draft -- and a fast first draft at that -- and we'll make allowances for grammar, spelling, and all the rest of the nitpicks that can be fixed later. The trick is to tell the story, and not worry about anything else. Some people naturally write cleaner

first drafts than others, but none of us are going to believe it will be perfect the first try.

Here's a bit of advice from me as a publisher rather than a writer: Don't ever believe you can write a perfect first draft, no matter how much editing you do as you go along. I've had too many of those types of novels submitted to me (and the cover letter even says so!), and I've yet to find one that doesn't have some major flaw in either the grammar or -- more often -- the story. Never believe you can get it right in one try and just send your piece off to the publisher.

Many new writers hate the idea of editing and they'll do just about anything to avoid it, including paying someone else to edit the book. Most book doctors are scams, and you should avoid them and learn to edit your own work. It's the only way that you'll get to be a better writer. Join critique groups and have others point out the problems. However, be careful even of those critiques! Sometimes the people will tell you to change things because that's the way they would have written the story, not because it makes the story you have written better.

Editing is part of being a published author, just like submissions and rejections. You're not only going to have to go over your work and fix it after the first draft, but you'll have to do it again after your publisher goes over it, and yet again after a copyeditor has the final check. You don't want to make any obvious mistakes in the first draft, but if you linger over every sentence and word choice, you probably aren't going to get finished -- during NaNo or not.

Editing is also your chance to make the story something closer to what you imagined

when it was in your head. You can't make it match perfectly, but you can get closer. Learn to enjoy editing. It can really be quite fun!

If you managed to write an entire novel in November (based on the expected word counts for your genre and market), then let the book sit for December. Have fun with other things. Write a short story or two, write holiday cards, and get some distance for the story. It's far easier to edit a book properly after you've put some distance between the creation and the editing. It will help you to see the story more clearly as you read it, and to spot the things that *aren't* there that were part of the vision in your head, but never actually made it into the manuscript.

If you haven't finished the novel, don't slow down now. Let the flow of NaNo carry over until you are done. You don't have to be quite as crazed as you were during the month of November, but don't entirely lose your momentum. Don't worry. You have plenty of time, both to write and to edit.

"It's a dull word," she said.

Said is an excellent word. In proper usage, it's almost invisible to readers, and yet performs the task assigned to it by identifying speakers. Other words leap out and draw attention to themselves, defeating the purpose of keeping the reader in the story and conveying information without the reader noticing.

Almost all publishers dislike the use of words other than said when said will do the job. People don't always shout, whisper, exclaim -- and they rarely enunciate. Most often they just, plain speak. Be careful of exchanging words for said because they do not mean the same things.

Quite often, in fact, you don't even need the 'said' tag.

"I need to get to the store," Tom said, pulling out his keys.

"I need to get to the store." Tom pulled out his keys.

Tom pulled out his keys. "I need to get to the store," he said.

Tom pulled out his keys. "I need to get to the store."

Anyone one of those four lines is fine. All of them identify the person speaking. Tom doesn't have to shout or whisper that he's going to the store, and he most certainly isn't going to do the impossible like smile or laugh words. You cannot really speak and sigh or laugh at the same time. Beware of exchanging a dialogue tag for an action tag. However, you can blend a speaking tag and action together:

"I can't read any more," Mary said, laughing

If you are interested in publication, be certain you're really saying what you mean and not randomly changing words like the dialogue tags. It's nice to use a thesaurus now and then, but don't try to replace every common word with something fancy when it doesn't work as well.

In fact, don't try to pepper your manuscripts with words to take the place of said when said will do the work. Forget what you may have been taught in school -- teachers are rarely writers and publishers, and their work is to teach you to expand your vocabulary, so they'll insist on words other than said.

The publishing world is a different place than school. Sometimes they don't mesh up as well as some might expect!

Hints from a Small Time Publisher

This is a little section for people who go on to pursue publication. In one of my other lives I am in charge of a fantasy imprint for an ebook/small press company. This gives me a little insight into the other side of the process.

First, let's discuss story length. 50,000 words is really too short for almost any kind of novel except some young adult novels and an occasional mainstream manuscript. For a paperback book in print the average is about 250-350 words per page (sometimes more for very small print). Dialogue takes up more space than prose, so that gives you a lot of pages with fewer words. Say about 300 words per page overall.

So a 50,000 word book will run about 165 to 170 pages, more or less. Looking at it from the word count side, most publishers want anywhere from 70,000 to 120,000 words. Study the guidelines to various publishers in the genre you're writing. This will not only help you figure out the length of work they want, but any other things that may help you better refine your work.

Always study the guidelines for a publisher or agent to whom you intend to send the manuscript.

Almost all of them are on line these days, and it's best to do a last minute check before you send something off. Do your best to look professional. The person who ignores the guidelines is sending a bad impression to the publisher by saying that they're either too stupid to read guidelines or (worse) they think guidelines don't apply to them. That's not

the kind of person a publisher wants to have to work with for the next few years.

Sometimes the choice of accepting a book comes down to just whether or not I like it. I've turned down some very well-written stories because I just didn't like the tale. It happens. In those cases I tell the person that they're going to have better luck at another publisher.

I turned down a novel the other day because of bad writing. And what made it so bad?

Was.

There were other problems as well, but *was* rose out of the pack and hissed its hydra heads at me so often I couldn't help but notice it. The novel was 64,462 words long. It had 1984 uses of *was* -- which means *was* turned out to be about one in every 33 words in the novel. That's close to 8 times on every page.

So I wrote a rejection note, pointed out the problem and even showed how to change some of the 'was' statements into something more active.

What did I get back?

A scathing note about how I obviously don't know anything about language. *Was* is a perfectly fine word, and the author had even read a writer's journal about how worrying about 'was' is stupid and using it won't stop you from getting published. Also, there are too many rules, and it's ruining the world of literature.

Fine. I suggested he submit the book to this author instead.

This is not the first time I've had a note back like this, either. So, tip number one -- never write a nasty note back to the publisher who turns down your book, for whatever reason. We share them sometimes with other publishers. We have an entire mailing list of small press and ebook publishers, and when people cause us problems or look like they're going to be trouble, we share the names.

Second tip -- don't be stupid about your writing. Be willing to learn. That doesn't mean you have to accept everything that a publisher tells to you, but it doesn't hurt to at least look over the suggestion before you go manic.

Was is a fine word when used in small doses where it's the only good choice. Every 33 words is not a good sign. If someone tells you not to worry about things like this, he's lying to you. Maybe he's even doing it on purpose. Sometimes I think there are pernicious people out there working very hard to make certain others don't get published. Or some of them are just stupid, and maybe lucky to have gotten published at all.

Worry about everything -- but especially worry about the easy things like 'was.' Weed it out as often as you can. Don't worry if some other author uses it more. I've seen published works where I would have edited out a few more uses as well. But you want to write better than those people, right?

Oh, and did I mention that there were another 505 uses of *were* in the novel? I didn't check beyond those two words.

The Question of Publication

There are choices in publication and they range from traditional publishing companies to small press and electronic publications, and down to self-published work. If you are interested in a writing career, do not leap into self-publication.

People can always point to one or two exceptions to anything, and that includes success in self-publishing. If you want a realistic look, however, go and count the number of books self-published just on LuLu.com and then start looking around at some of the other self-publish sites. I believe IUniverse publishes from 400 to 500 books a month. Publish America likely has at least that much.

Then think of your own book there, in that mass, trying to get attention.

Bookstores, with very few exceptions, will not carry self-published books and most reviewers will not look at them. The number of success cases with self-publishing is so small that it shouldn't be held up as a guide to others. They are flukes, and far from the norm.

But that doesn't mean that traditional publishing is the answer for you. It's wise, however, to look at all the options before you leap into something that doesn't suit you. Self-publishing is easy, and many writers take that choice because of the ease. It may be that you're looking for something that self-publishing can't give you. Know what you want, and choose wisely based on your needs.

Here is a brief list of things to consider if you are looking at the idea of publication, and what different types of publication can offer:

Traditional Big Publishing Companies

Obviously this is where you want to go to see your books on the shelves at the big stores and to have name-recognition with readers. They also offer advances! However, many of the places now require that you have an agent before you can submit to them, which makes the process even slower.

Small Press Publishing Companies

These companies put out fewer books and smaller print runs than the big companies, but many of them are well-respected in their genres and can win you a solid readership. There is rarely an advance, though, and while they don't often use agents, the number of books they buy each year is smaller, so it's difficult to win a place here.

Electronic Publishing

Ebook publishing is a growing field, but still not widely accepted as a good publishing format. However, it is a great place for odd books that don't seem to fit into the line-ups of traditional or small press companies. Also, the author gets a larger percentage of the book's sale price than you would with print. If you can create a market for your books and continue to draw readers, you can do quite well here -- but it's a hard path.

Self-Publishing

Choose self-publishing only if you want to share your book with a few friends and relatives, and aren't interested in anything more. While some nonfiction books do well in self-publishing, very few fiction ones do. If you are considering self-publishing, go to lulu.com. This is the best self-publishing company out there.

Never pay to have your book published!

My personal suggestion to anyone looking at the idea of publication is to start at the top and work down through the lists. You can always self-publish, but once you have, you have thrown away your chance at the other types of publications.

Submitting to publishers is a long, slow process and often very annoying. Once you send something out, start working on the next novel. Don't linger over the one, because you are never going to make it as a writer with only one book, anyway.

Keep writing -- and enjoy it!

Just for Fun

Here are two end pieces added just for fun. Enjoy!

The Angst of Hero Naming

The tale of a hero beyond compare,
With flashing eyes and perfect hair.
Flawless words flowed from my head --
Until I reached that first damned *said*.

Now the true strife begins at last
As floundering in a sea of names, I'm cast.
Rosebud and Cloud are far too cute,
And he's no Bob, beyond dispute
Corwin? Hilton? Lane or Bard?
Naming a kid couldn't be half this hard!
A couple dozen names go by,
(My hero gives me the evil eye)
I search the shelves for baby name books
(Kept hidden to avoid occasional odd looks)
With frantic haste I start paging through,
No, no --Androcles will never do!
No Mac or Mark or Michael here
Such names are too plain, I fear.
Nicholas has a nice sound it's true --
But I've used it in a book or two.

So to stranger, archaic lists I turn

No he's absolutely not a Vern!

Trying to keep plot lines in my head -

Would what's-her-name take a Loki to bed?

Hours of writing time frittered away

That can't be the dawn of a new day!

I sit and curse that first damned said --

Oh the hell with it! I'll call him Fred.

Author versus Character

Outline and notes, Chapter Five

Start:

Author -- The night passes quietly. Character sleeps soundly and wakes up at the first light. Rooster crows. Climbs down from the hay loft and stretches, pleased to see that the fog of the night before has cleared and he can now see the town -- a couple dozen buildings, including a traveler's inn. He'd found refuge in their stable. Grateful for the chance to sleep so comfortably --

Character -- You know, I've been quiet and gone along with you for the previous four chapters without a complaint, but this is too much. I've spent six days sleeping on leaves, huddled by a tree in the rain, and half drowned and miserable. And now you think sleeping in a hay pile is comfortable! I tossed and turned all night. Hay isn't down feathers, you know -- hay is dried twigs. They stab. And what the hell is this? (Character holds up something between his fingers.)

Author -- (peers closely) Looks like a needle to me.

Character -- Right. What perverted person would put a needle in a pile of hay? It jabbed me.

Author -- Did it? (Looks hopefully at the needle, then glances at research books) Is it rusty? Tetanus... severe muscle spasms, also called lockjaw...that might be interesting.

I hadn't thought of an illness like that, before the shots and everything. Let me see it.

Character -- See what?

Author -- The needle!

Character -- (Brushing hands) What needle? There's no needle here. Can't be. This is pre-industrial. No needle... and no tetanus.

Author -- (Reluctantly puts aside the books) Oh well. Okay, where were we?

Character -- New day, no fog, etc.

Author -- Right. Okay. Character makes his way through the stable yard and past the open door to the inn's kitchen --

Character -- His stomach growling --

Author -- If you're hungry eat the journey bread in your jacket pocket.

Character -- Are you joking? That stuff's so hard I could chip rocks with it. A caveman with this journey bread could have ruled the world.

Author -- Character walks past the door and out into the street where he sees something that makes him shut up and forget everything else. There, on the hill top overlooking the village is the black stone castle that has haunted his dreams for the last five years! He anxiously turns that way, heading toward the distant castle gate --

Character -- Are you crazy? Or do you just think I'm stupid?

Author -- What's the problem now? That's the castle -- your goal in sight --

Character -- Yeah, the castle. Those dreams would be the ones where I wake up in a cold sweat, screaming because the castle sucked me in and buried me alive. And now you expect me to blithely head straight up and walk in? To hell with that. I'm heading the opposite way on this road, just as fast as I can --

Author -- Back toward the toll gate and the guards you so carefully avoided last night?
Oh, good plan.

Character -- Damn. I forgot. What's to the right?

Author -- A fetid swamp still curling with the last tendrils of the fog from the night before. It must once have been part of a lake and port. Character can even make out the masts of ships buried in the muck, vines twining up across tattled sails... and the bleached bones of men, trapped within those ropes of green, as though the plants had suddenly reached out and grabbed them --

Character -- I get the idea. Thank you so much for another new level of nightmare to add to my others. What's to the left?

Author -- To the east (left for Characters not paying attention to where they are) he can see a few more buildings, some of them obviously abandoned. Beyond that are rocky fields and small plots of dying plants. Less than a mile away is the shadow of the forest --

Character -- Excellent! Oh, and may I say that five chapters is a bit long to be waiting for

a name?

Author -- I want it to be the right name, the perfect name. I'll know it when I see it.

Character -- Fine. Whatever. Character casts one worried look at the brooding black castle and sets off on foot past the falling buildings and into the fields --

Author -- Almost immediately Character hears the baying of dogs and looks worried toward the castle. He can see the pack that is pacing beneath the walls, he thinks waiting for the morning meal. But now they've seen him moving in the empty land below --

Character -- Shit.

Author -- Don't worry. They're only poodles.

Character -- A pack of poodles? Toy? Miniature? Standard?

Author -- A mix. And actually they're only half poodle.

Character -- (Eyeing them cautiously and trying to guess if he can reach the forest and get away from them) Half poodle and half what?

Author -- Wolf.

Character -- (Stops and shakes head.) Wolves. You crossed poodles and wolves. And the reason was...?

Author -- Wild killers, less fur to clean up. They have spotted Character, and the woodle

pooves bay -- or maybe yip -- again.

Character -- Woodle pooves. I'm getting an image of the dogs here.... oh man, that's just wrong.

Author -- Are you trying for the trees or not?

Character -- Can I make it?

Author -- Probably. They're kind of inbred woodle pooves. Not entirely bright.

Character -- Okay then. Better than the castle.

Author -- Character jogs along the broken path between the rocks as the woodle pooves gather at the top of the hill. He's more than half way to the cursed forest before they --

Character -- (Stops) Cursed forest? You didn't say anything about the forest being cursed!

Author -- Let's see: Deadly swamp, dying fields, big brooding black castle.... of course the forest is cursed. Duh.

Character -- Good point. My mistake. What kind of curse?

Author -- (flipping through notes) A century ago a major battle was fought at the village. A mage-king, seeing all about to be lost, cast a desperate spell to save his throne. He brought not only the plants of the lake but also the trees into the battle. They won, but unfortunately, the trees developed a taste for blood. They won't kill you... well, not right

away. You can escape in a couple years. You won't be sane, of course, but I think you might be an interesting character if you were insane.

Character -- I don't need a cursed forest of vampire trees to drive me crazy. I've got you.

Character, sensing something evil from the forest -- or maybe not wanting to risk his luck with the woodle pooves, turns around and hurries back to the village.

Author -- Character soon reaches the street and turns toward the castle.

Character -- No.

Author -- What do you mean no? You've found out there is no other direction. Now start up for the castle --

Character -- I am not going to that frigging castle!

Author -- Do you know how long I've been setting this moment up? That castle has been in your dreams --

Character -- Nightmares --

Author -- for five years! You've been pursuing it since you came of age!

Character -- I had dreams about Daisy from the Bread and Barrel for ten years! Why couldn't I pursue her instead?

Author -- This isn't that kind of book!

Character -- Like I haven't noticed!

Author -- Character, reluctantly realizing he has no choice, and that this is his destiny, heads for --

Character -- The privy. It has to be around here by the inn somewhere.

Author -- You're just putting off the inevitable.

Character -- Where is the privy? Or we're going to have something else inevitable happen.

Author -- The privy is at the opposite side of the stable. Character can see the swarms of flies and flinches at the stench as he nears --

Character -- Bullshit.

Author -- I don't think bulls have anything to do with this problem.

Character -- Look, this is stupid. The world has magic. The first thing they're going to use it for is to fix the stink from the outhouse! Character heads for the privy, noting the faint scent of lilacs and roses. Butterflies dance in the air.

Author -- As he slips in and closes the door --

Character -- A little privacy, if you don't mind. Out.

Author -- ...

Author -- ...

Author -- ...

Character steps back out, looking toward the door to the kitchen again.

Author -- Too bad you don't have any money.

Character -- (digs in to jacket and pulls out shiny silver coin)

Author -- You've been holding out on me.

Character -- I got it off one of those five bandits who tried to kill me back in chapter three. You know, right before the bridge -- the one that had borne the weight of a thousand peasants and their wagons -- gave way under me for no apparent reason and I nearly drowned.

Author -- Yeah, but you lost the bandits who were trying to kill you.

Character -- I'm going for breakfast. Then I'm going to lay low for the rest of the day and escape the way I got in. Don't even bother to say anything. Character goes in and orders food, has a quiet leisurely meal, lingering over bread and honey. The local serving wench isn't bad looking, either. She reminds him of Daisy, the girl he left behind. They might have a pleasant day together. He finishes up the food, pushing away the plate --

Author -- And the guards, having been relieved of their posts at the gate, come in for their own breakfast. They immediately spot Character and know he's a stranger who didn't come through their gate. Worse, though, is that they recognize him.

Character -- What? I've never been here! They can't --

Author -- The guards fall on him, and he's soon beaten to his knees --

Character -- Beaten? But -- but --

Loter, Captain of the Guard -- Another one! You look like your great grandfather, boy!

We're not going to have any more mad mage-kings!

Selis, another guard -- I didn't think that dream crap would work, but hell, what is this?

Fifteen of them now? Up boy.

Author -- Selis grabs Character by the arm and hoists him to his feet, taking him outside. Captain Loter loops a rope around his arms and ties it to his saddle --

Character -- But --

Author -- Loter kicks his horse into a trot, heading toward the castle gate, and only barely slows when Character stumbles and falls, dragged along the rough road. Bloody, bruised and panting, Character gets back to his feet and tries to jog along behind the horse.

Character -- Look, it doesn't have to be like this --

Author -- I gave you the chance to come here quietly. You really shouldn't argue with your author. It just gives me more time to come up with something more interesting to do.

Character -- Maybe the woodle pooves wouldn't be so bad --

Author -- The group slips through the gate and into the shadows of a courtyard where it seems the sun never reaches. People scurry for the shadows and hide at their approach. Somewhere a man bellows in rage. Loter doesn't pause, as though the place unsettles him. The three head straight into the building -- cold, damp walls, mold in corners, the sounds of rats running. Salis pushes open a door and the head down the first set of stairs, then another... down and down and farther until it seems...

Character -- The castle has swallowed him alive. Yeah, I get it.

Author -- Finally they reach a hall lit by a flickering torch, obviously magically fueled because the cobwebs are so thick that no one could have been down this way in a long time. Salis grimaces and uses his sword to cut through them. Decay and death scent the air, and the only sound is hysterical crying from behind a door they pass. "Can I go home now? Please, can I go home?" Loter stops at another door and nods. Salis pries up the rusted metal bar.

Character -- I hope he gets tetanus.

Author -- The door comes open with a loud, wail of unused hinges and Loter shoves Character inside and down to his knees again.

Loter -- What's your name, boy? We need it for the records.

Character -- (Looks plaintively at author.)

Author -- (Grabs name books.)

Guards -- (Anxious to get out of this hell hole look at author.)

Author -- Yes, fine. Right. Okay! I found the name: Varyn!

Character -- (Looks back at the guard.) My name is Varyn.

Loter -- We'll write it in the book, Barren --

Character -- No, no. Varyn, with a V and a --

Author -- The guards slam the door closed. Varyn can hear the bar drop into place and the sound of the guards hurrying away, and the hysterical whisper of someone else: "Can I go home now? Can I go home now?" Varyn leans back, ignoring blood, scrapes and bruises. He knows -- having seen the cobwebs -- that no one is going to come back for a long, long time.

Varyn -- (Bangs head on door a couple times) This is great. Wonderful. Do you have any clue how you're going to get me back out of here?

Author -- Well.... Do you still have that journey bread?

A Few Books on Writing



The NaNoWriMo handbook, by NaNoWriMo creator Chris Baty, is available at Amazon.com, B&N, or an [independent bookstore](#) near you!

This is a wonderful book to get your through NaNo!

Books for Writers by Writers -- Holly Lisle Bookstore -- <http://shop.hollylisle.com/>

