

Stuck? Try These Novel Development Tools

by Linda Rohrbough

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For me, it goes like this. I get a brain flash. I can hardly wait to get it on paper. I know enough to get my log lines, my synopsis and my theme figured out (the stuff I teach in my workshops). Then I start.

I'm going along pretty good for a while. Then I find myself cleaning the baseboards and lining up my writing books neatly at the edge of the bookshelf. What happened? For me, it's a problem with the book I haven't even defined much less figured out how to answer. So here are a couple of tools I use to get unstuck.

Section Sheet Master for Scene and Sequel Planning

I often turn to what sounds like a complicated document, the Section Sheet Master for Scene and Sequel Planning. It's a self-explanatory template for documenting the story movement in a scene (available for download on my website under Articles [here](#) – scroll down to “Novel Writing Worksheets in Microsoft Word Format”).

Let me back up and explain. Novels are written in scenes and sequels. A scene is action -- something happens. As a result, a character either fails or the action brings about some consequence to further complicate things. The character then thinks about what happened and comes up with a plan, a new goal. The process the character goes through of mulling over the event and establishing their next goal is called the sequel.

When I'm stuck, it's often because I never figured out the character's scene goal from the last sequel. If I don't know, or am not clear enough on what they want to accomplish, I end up with scenes that don't move the story forward. As a consequence I can end up with one or more sequels where the character has the same discussion with themselves or someone else. That bores me and I get frustrated. And if I'm bored and frustrated, it's a lead pipe cinch my reader will be, too. This is when a no-brainer activity, like cleaning baseboards, starts to look pretty good.

The Section Sheet Master has another use. In the editing stage of the novel, I can use it to look for the scene goals. Award-winning western novelist [Dusty Richards](#) says you can't remind the reader too often what the character's goals are. I have a tendency to be subtle, but when I'm stuck, I find it's often because I've been so subtle even I don't know what the goal is. Using the Section Sheet Master to track scenes and sequels helps me figure out what I need to know to effectively strengthen the book.

I could fill out a Section Sheet Master for every scene and sequel in the book before I start writing. I don't, but there are those who do. I've heard novelist [Deb Stover](#) say she initially figures out forty scenes and sequels because then she knows she has enough material to finish.

Goal, Motivation, Conflict (GMC) Chart for Each Character

If working the scene I'm stuck on doesn't solve my problem, I turn to the big picture. What is my character after on an internal and external level? What are their fears? What's motivating them? This is when I use the Goal, Motivation Conflict Chart another self-explanatory tool (also available on my website under Articles [here](#) – scroll down to “Novel Writing Worksheets in Microsoft Word Format”). In the best fiction, the author takes what the character is afraid of and exposes them to it so readers get to watch the character react. In the movie “Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom,” Indy is afraid of snakes. So what does the writer do? Put him in a whole room full of snakes. That's a superficial example, but you get the idea.

If I'm stuck, I probably haven't figured out what problem my character has internally that they're trying to solve for themselves with some external action. If I don't know the big picture, then I'm not going to be able to figure out the smaller chunks, like my character's scene goal. And I'm not going to be able to put them in a situation that creates conflict as a catalyst for tension and to reveal who they are.

The character’s internal conflict may be one they haven’t acknowledged to themselves. In the first movie “Rocky,” the main character is a street fighter turned pro boxer. Rocky’s external goal is to work hard enough to beat the world champ. But internally he doesn’t see himself as a winner. The story is how falling in love with Adrian helps him see himself in a new way so he can take the title.

What I’ve learned hanging out with a few *New York Times* best-selling novelists is the pros do as much of the character motivation and figuring out scenes work as they can up front. But sometimes the novel changes mid-stream, and it’s practical to have a few tools to fall back on to define what’s changed and why.

Just the activity of filling out a Master Section Sheet or revisiting my Goal Motivation Conflict chart for a troublesome character is often enough to miraculously get me unstuck. Other times I have to work these tools for several days before I get my gumption back. Either way, it’s a confidence builder to have a plan in place for when the work is not flowing or stalled. These are just a couple of the many novel development tools that help me. I hope you’ll find them useful the next time you get stuck working on your novel.

Biography:

Linda Rohrbough has been writing professionally since 1989, has more than 5,000 articles, seven books and numerous awards for her fiction and non-fiction. Linda’s latest book is Weight Loss Surgery with the Adjustable Gastric Band: Everything You Need to Know Before and After Surgery to Lose Weight Successfully. Visit her website for details:

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