



Dear Novel-Writers,

If you're at all like me, you lie in bed at night thinking about the next story you want to tell. It unfolds in your mind, clear and thrilling: the chase scene! The first kiss! The betrayal . . . You can hear the dialogue—witty, clever, profound. You can imagine the reviews: riveting and provocative; should be on everyone's summer reading list; best book of the decade.

Then why is it so hard to sit down and actually write the thing? How come those scenes, which I can see so clearly, fail to form themselves on paper? Where are all those witty and entertaining characters?

In my own experience—and I now have fourteen books to my name—writing a book is exceptionally hard work. But there are two things I do to help, and I offer them to you in hopes that they'll help you, too.

TIP NUMBER ONE: Make an outline.

Oh dear—an outline! The word makes some writers frown. They worry that an outline will rope them in, hamper their creativity, stifle their muse. But that's not the way it works. The outline is just a map. It is the plan I invented to guide me from time to time so I don't lose my way. My outline is like my grocery list—something I refer to so I don't forget the ingredients for tonight's feast. Having a map doesn't ruin the trip, but keeps me from getting lost in the woods. And having the grocery list doesn't ruin my dinner, but reminds me to get coffee cake for breakfast, as well.

Begin your outline by describing Beginning, Middle and End. Ask yourself who your character is going to be, and make a list of what happens to her. Make a list (I love lists) of the various ways your character will deal with what has happened . . . Make sure the scenes increase in intensity as the story progresses . . . leading to the climactic

moment! How does your character cope? How does she react? How does your story end? How does your character, having dealt with the events of the story, change and grow? Is justice served? The murderer jailed? The secret uncovered? Does your character triumph or fail?

Refer to your outline on the days when the words just don't flow, when the whole idea of writing a whole novel seems crazy. Your outline will get you back on track. And if something in your outline doesn't seem to be working, change it! Make it something you do like, and that write that.

Which leads me to TIP NUMBER TWO: Press on! Write every day. Keep pressing on until you have a complete manuscript. One of E. M. Forster's characters famously asks: "How do I know what I think till I see what I say?" Bash out that first draft, not worrying too much about what's wrong with it. What's right is that you've completed it. Then, when the whole first draft is complete, you can see what needs fixing, and what is already perfect. Good luck!