

How to Write a Novel

LESSON 19



Provisional Outlining & Provisional Thinking: Dealing on the Fly with the Mess in the Middle HOLLY LISLE

<https://HollysWritingClasses.com>

NOTICE: You Do NOT Have the Right to Reprint or Resell Any Portion Of This Course!

You Also MAY NOT Give Away, Sell or Share the Content Herein

You have the LIMITED right to make a single backup copy of this course for your own use, and to print one copy of lessons and unlimited copies worksheets for your own use.

If you obtained this workshop from anywhere other than <https://hollyswritingclasses.com>, you have a pirated copy.

If you find this workshop elsewhere, please report the location to: <http://novelwritingschool.com/support>

© 2018, 2019 by Holly Lisle

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. No part of this workshop, including but not limited to pdfs, audio, video, or other mediums, including mediums that may be added in the future, may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, photocopying, or recording, without express dated and signed permission in writing from the publisher.

DISCLAIMER AND/OR LEGAL NOTICES:

The information in this course has been built from my life and experiences, and it is what works for me. While I have made every effort to translate the decidedly quirky workings of one human mind into a process that will be applicable and accessible to other human minds, I cannot guarantee that this course will work for you, or that my processes will be applicable to your needs and purposes. Nor can I guarantee your success. This course is not intended as a source of legal, accounting, medical or other advice, and is written for information purposes only. While every attempt has been made to verify the information in this course, mistakes happen, and I make them. I will not assume responsibility for errors, inaccuracies, or omissions. I reserve the right to alter and update this course as my processes change, as I learn new things, and as I improve existing methods.

Intro

Last week you got — along with your regular lesson, the demo novel, and your worksheets — a short, messy Provisional Outline.

The outline is neither what the book was when I started, nor what it will become when I've finished my revision.

It is just a tool I came up with some years ago to keep myself from crashing and abandoning novels in the middle when they changed on me unexpectedly.

I have to be grateful that THIS novel, ***Dead Man's Party***, has done that. Twice so far, and probably not for the last time, because I've been writing so much in known worlds lately that I had forgotten my use of the technique, and had not planned a lesson around it.

Why, you're asking, am I grateful that my novel careened off track in onot one but for separate side jumps so far?

Because I'd dropped this technique so thoroughly from memory, that ***DMP*** had to punch me four times in the side of the head with major story shifts before I went, "Oh... yeah. *That.*"

And this is a technique that you'll eventually need. And one some of you need NOW.

So this week... *that.*

Onward.

Writing Through the Mess in the Middle

Your Muse is going to have better ideas as you're writing, because this is part of what Muses do.

However, your Muse is also going to have worse ideas, and ideas that belong in other books, and ideas that would be awesome if you were someone you aren't.

Your Muse is no more infallible than your Editor, or You. **All of you are going to make mistakes**, all of you are going to go racing down wrong paths, and all of you are going to put dumb things as well as brilliant things on the table and in your books, and then have to go back through in revision and clean up the mess.

Why?

Because every first draft of a novel is just your best guess at the story you're telling.

And it's even more limited than that. Your "best guess" isn't a brilliant global best guess that can encompass the whole novel. The whole novel doesn't exist yet, and you won't even have most of your best ideas about what it can become until the first draft is finished.

To add to the impossibility of your first draft being perfect, you'll have a few brand-new best ideas *while doing your revision*.

So your best guess and my best guess are limited to just “My best guess right now,” based on wherever we are in our books at the the moment we’re writing them.

For me, it has so far gone like this:

TAKE ONE — Artifact and character creation phase: My best guess when I got started was a sort of neat near-future story about the integration of AI technology and virtual gaming.

TAKE TWO — First words of actual novel hit the page: And then my Muse used one of my four main characters to kill another of my characters in the first scene, and the story got darker and more dangerous than expected.

When my dead guy got up and started walking around, it got weird.

TAKE THREE — When I asked Middle Story questions: At which point, I discovered that I needed to drop the novel back eight years in time, to when the most important things were happening.

TAKE FOUR — A wake-up-in-the-morning-stand-in-the-shower revelation: When last week my Muse insisted that while *Dead Man’s Party* can still be dark, it has to be funny. Terry Pratchett / Douglas Adams funny.

My Muse is no [piker](#) when it comes to impossible demands.

Just yesterday (as I write this) I did figure out how to make it funny, and this morning I woke up with the “funny voice” of the novel in my head.

So in the next scene I write, I’ll be shifting from grimdark voice to what’s probably going to be a cheap, bad imitation of Terry Pratchett.

I’d love to say that I have the whole struggle between Muse, Editor, and Me in the bag now, but I can’t say that. The first draft isn’t done, and until it’s done, it can and probably will shift again.

Why This Matters

Most writers, including a lot of pros, take a shift in content or tone as an excuse to stop writing new material, to go back and fix the first part of the book to turn what they've already written into the story that is their "better idea."

And initially, I did this too. The process led to a lot of unfinished projects.

Figure — if I had done that with *Dead Man's Party*, I would now be starting back at Chapter 1 for the **fourth time**.

Years of punishing experience taught me the following essential truths of writing fiction:

- There is always a better idea
- There is always a BETTER better idea
- There is always a different approach
- There is always a different voice
- It is nearly impossible in the heat of writing to tell the difference between a genuine "better idea" and a chaotic "disaster idea" (though for the worst "disaster ideas" you will get an avoidance technique this week)
- The only way to discover the value of any idea is to write it
- The only way to finish the damn project is to *Just. Keep. Writing.*
- The only way to just keep writing is to pretend you got the first stuff right, no matter which voice, idea, or approach you're trying at the moment...
- In spite of the fact that all of those things can change on you at any given time...

- And in spite of the fact that **you can never know until the first draft is finished** which changes were the right ones

If you think this sounds like “How to Build Your Path to a Padded Room,” all I can say is, “Yep. It *could* be that.”

And for a lot of writers, it is. Or a path to giving up in frustration and quitting.

Or a path to never trying anything outside the safe box of “whatever you figured out when you were just getting started that worked back then”.

Even if it doesn’t break you entirely, make you hate writing, or make you quit outright, you can leave a lot of unfinished novels on the shoals of your career because it is very, very easy to follow wrong paths that break your book.

My unfinished novel *Talysmana* is a case in point. That one jumped sideways several times on me.

It is because, when I was writing that book, I’d forgotten entirely about having once discovered Provisional Outlining, that the novel remains unfinished.

Same with *Dreaming the Dead*.

Remembering it with *Dead Man’s Party* gives me the path to go back and finish both of those once I have a bit more time and fewer pressing commitments.

So having given you the MANY reasons you need to learn how to build a provisional outline, I’m now going to show you how.

"If Anything Is Possible, Nothing Matters"

I'm quoting Jim Baen (first publisher of Baen Books) explaining to me why he'd rejected a collaborative series Christie Golden and I proposed to him.

Our big pitch for it was, "In this world, anything can happen." It was when I understood why that was a path to nothing that my writing leapt forward to a new and deeper level. **So first I give you...**

HOLLY'S DEFINITION OF A GOOD NOVEL:

Defining the limitations of the possible in an imaginary world, then repeatedly slamming your characters into the impossible to see how they cope.

To write good fiction, your Muse needs to embrace your inner sadist from time to time.

Yours can be a gentle sadist if you desire, content to merely keep two lovers apart until they have figured out why they are perfect for each other and have earned their right to be together.

Or yours could be like mine... (walking dead guys, cannibals, an Underworld, demands for humor in the midst of horror, a nightmarish stream of "better ideas"...))

Aaaanyway... The provisional outline allows you to create **a running definition of the possible within your story at any given moment.**

It allows for quick and easy updating as things change.

It allows you to embrace both great ideas and awful ideas and have them not wreck your book.

And in nature the provisional outline is painless to create, taking an absolute minimum of time and technology. You can do it with a pencil and paper, but a simple text file will give you a cleaner result.

Either way, it's easy to update as you need,
to add to, to remove from.
All without EVER touching a word
of what you've actually written.

This is practically weightless forward motion. (And the need for this Forward Motion process — of keeping moving through first draft all the way to the ending — was the origin of the name of my first writers' community.)

So what's the process for creating this sanity-saving document?

Starting with where you are in your story right now, you create a line-for-scene outline of what you think you should have written.

You can use either the COAD or PACTS format to come up with your lines for each scene.

Doing this, by the way, scratches that “I need to go back and fix things” itch that drives so many of us crazy before we learn how to not get itchy.

Last week, my outline looked like this:

IN-PROGRESS STORY OUTLINE:

1) Bill -- the man who named himself God, hunts down and kills Andy, then escapes.

2) Amanda, working at a Caravan stop, spots one-time actor/hero Harry Tankred and pays a co-worker to wait on him.

3) Andy, suddenly alone in his head, fakes being alive, getting help from his employee Corri, and patches himself back together.

4) Andy seeks sustenance to kickstart his corpse, and in the process finds something that points him toward Bill.

5) [BIG CHANGE] In the BINKLEY CARAVAN, Jaro and allies cross the Mississippi, killing cannibals, and find the remains of a caravan that crossed before them.

6) [FLASHBACK] Amanda meets Jaro, who both falls in love and discovers the importance of individual human freedom of thought and action -- which causes Amanda to plan the destruction of the Underworld.

7) Amanda discovers that God has entered the Underworld, [NEW] and connects him to a real-world identity.

8) Andy discovers the true identity of the man who killed him, and sets out to kill his murderer.

9) Amanda builds the new entry to the Underworld, and leaves a warning on the bulletin board.

10) Bill tries to figure out who knew him in the Underworld, and figures out a way to recapture what remains of humanity as his slaves [GOING TO NEED A DIFFERENT WAY IN THIS NEW AND GRIMMER WORLD].

11) Andy gets the Excalibur alert, and decides that his best chance to find and kill Bill is to become Excalibur's guardian angel.

12) [BIG CHANGE] Amanda comes out as the goddess and eventual destroyer of the Underworld.

13) Andy comes to Amanda/Excalibur's call, determined to be her defender.

14) Jaro and the Binkley Caravan capture a lone cannibal alive, sneaking into their encampment, and capture her, hoping to get information from her about other cannibals -- and discover she's living in a completely different world.

15) Bill sees that Amanda/Excalibur is building an army around herself, and joins a Caravan headed to help her.

16) * Andy, traveling alone, is attacked by cannibals who confuse him for a zombie (or correctly identify him as one), and he defeats them -- but takes new damage -- AND BIG PIVOTAL MID-POINT ISSUE

17) Amanda and the others in [TOWN] greet the first pilgrim caravan, welcoming the troop reinforcements, supplies, and weapons that will further their cause -- and meets in person for the first time some of her allied AI/humans.

18) Jaro hears word of the AI who came out as Excalibur, and that she has called for help against a monster who is hunting her and those who helped her. He and the Caravan plot a shorter route to her now-known location.

19) Amanda hears that the caravan Harry Tankred was in has turned around and is coming back to town, and realizes that she's not going to be able to avoid him a second time.

20)... Blank through 33

This week, that's not gonna cut it, because *this* week my Muse has added Terry-Pratchett-Douglas-Adams-esque humor to its list of demands.

So now I'm going to see where and how I might be able to create that.

I'm going to walk you scene by scene through this thing and show you the questions I ask and the answers I come up with to get myself a better Provisional Outline.

First, the overall story question:

How can this novel become funny? Really, truly, belly-laugh funny?

It's about:

- A guy who wants to rule the world, and almost succeeded once
- An AI inhabiting the body of a dead super-soldier
- An AI inhabiting the body who fell in love with a human, and who is inhabiting the body of a First-Rank Socialite Bitch who was the love interest of a rock-star-famous actor
- A guy who fell in love with the AI
- A guy who fell in love with and got screwed over by the bitch

Okay.

Muse has some ideas here.

What if the AIs are still able to communicate with the minds trapped in the bodies they inhabit — bodies who may or may not be able to also move them around if they're ever not paying attention?

First: This sets me up for some grimdark humor when The AI, Andy, gets the body he's inhabiting killed, and when the body's owner — the supersoldier — is pissed off that the AI had him locked out of the physical stuff.

Second: This sets me up for some Too Much Information humor when Amanda gets an earful from her body's original owner about the Original Owner's relationship with Harry Tankred.

First-Rank Socialite Bitch is not, by the way, at all happy about living in a world where roving packs of cannibals are a real thing — and the only folks who made it out of most of the cities — because THEY could always find food, so Amanda gets to hear about that.

Zombies Versus Cannibals, the game that made such a mess of the world — the WHOLE world — needs to come into the story early. And Muse says, "One of the POV characters needs to be a Zombie Cannibal."

Neither I nor my Editor are convinced by this idea, but my Muse is pitching scenes at me in a fast and furious fashion, and as it pitches, I can really see were this could work.

And with the provisional outline, bringing in a fifth point of view is no tougher than adding humor, or switching out scenes I got wrong.

So let me put **Potential Zombie Cannibal POV** into my mix.

Still searching for humor.

The romance storyline in this is sacred. It has to matter to both Amanda and Jaro that they find each other.

And one of the things Pratchett did brilliantly was to *bring things that truly mattered in the real world into his plots* — to write stories that were about our world turned on its ear, to tuck passion and love and heart into stories that could make you laugh until tears ran down your cheeks and snot ran from your nose.

My Muse, in hammering me with "Like Pratchett", is not insisting that I write in Terry Pratchett's voice, which I couldn't do well anyway.

It's insisting that the story needs to be hilarious... but it still needs to be about the real world, about real problems, about real pain, real fear, real loss — but turned sideways and laughed at.

And I don't know that I can do this, but I see what it's pushing for, and it would be really cool if I could pull it off.

So I'm throwing myself wholly into this.

Let's see what that does to LAST week's provisional outline...

IN-PROGRESS STORY OUTLINE:

1) Bill -- the man who named himself God, hunts down and kills Andy, then escapes.

That can stay the same, though I might need to focus a bit more on the world in which Bill finds himself, on his dry observations of the crappy little town, the walls that let him in...

He can in the new version be much more mustache-twirly... or maybe not. Maybe I should make him "Sympathetic in His Own Eyes", which is a much scarier way to write a villain. I can leave the humor for the heroes.

2) Amanda, working at a Caravan stop, spots one-time actor/hero Harry Tankred and pays a co-worker to wait on him — *and gets the down and dirty on him from First-Rank Socialite Bitch (who needs a name)*

As suggested above...

Meanwhile, however, my next scene is one of those that takes a massive hit.

THIS: Andy, suddenly alone in his head, fakes being alive, getting help from his employee Corri, and patches himself back together.

Becomes this...

3) Andy gets a "YOU MORON" speech from the guy who owns the body [who also needs a name] – along with the "Okay, dumbass, now do this" instructions from the original owner.

And I LOVE the idea of that new scene. It gives me a way to potentially save my dead guy, as well as Andy, though I see the process of him not becoming all-the-way-dead requiring some time.

And that moves me to scene four, which can stay mostly the same, though with the voice of Andy's Drill Sergeant in his head.

4) Andy seeks sustenance to kickstart his corpse, and in the process finds something that points him toward Bill.

Next...

5) [BIG CHANGE] In the BINKLEY CARAVAN, Jaro and allies cross the Mississippi, killing cannibals, and find the remains of a caravan that crossed before them.

The scene above can be kind of dark and scary, though the killing of the cannibals could have the bittersweet humor of the cannibals still using the game terminology when they attack.

The next scene is going to need some rethinking, but not in the provisional outline. As written, it's dark, heavy. It needs to point out both characters' attraction to each other, but also the fact that Jaro is human and Amanda is an AI, and that the fact that they're falling in love is clearly hopeless to both of them. Even great literature sometimes manages to pull humor out of romantic mismatches.

6) [FLASHBACK] Amanda meets Jaro, who both falls in love and discovers the importance of individual human freedom of thought and action -- which causes Amanda to plan the destruction of the Underworld.

The description in the provisional outline holds together from the content standpoint, but if the funny concept is what I end up with, it's really going to need some humor. So...

6) [FLASHBACK] Amanda meets Jaro, who both falls in love and discovers the importance of individual human freedom of thought and action -- which causes Amanda to plan the destruction of the Underworld.
[be funnier]

On to the next scene.

7) Amanda discovers that God has entered the Underworld, [NEW] and connects him to a real-world identity.

This needs to be a counterpoint scene. As dark and scary as I can make it, so that the funny bits get to offer comic relief to something that needs it. So...

7) Amanda discovers that God has entered the Underworld, [NEW] and connects him to a real-world identity. [GO DARK]

Next...

8) Andy discovers the true identity of the man who killed him, and sets out to kill his murderer.

If I have Andy's "other voice" bossing him around and telling him the body's original owner needs to be doing this, I should be able to make this both funny and dark.

8) Andy [talking to other self] discovers the true identity of the man who killed him, and sets out to kill his murderer.

Then...

9) Amanda builds the new entry to the Underworld, and leaves a warning on the bulletin board.

This one is going to take some thought — and probably when I'm doing the actual revision. I need to have the character voices in my head, and right now I have nothing for the Society Bitch but a few women who belonged to a country club my first ex belonged to (on a "my daddy is a member" membership).

So...

9) Amanda builds the new entry to the Underworld, and leaves a warning on the bulletin board.
[Includes Original Body Voice]

Onward, growling...

10) Bill tries to figure out who knew him in the Underworld, and figures out a way to recapture what remains of humanity as his slaves [GOING TO NEED A DIFFERENT WAY IN THIS NEW AND GRIMMER WORLD].

And in the above, this is a total rethink, but one that most assuredly can wait for revision, or at least until I hit a "Wall of Bill" and HAVE to bring this scene up to speed.

10) Bill tries to figure out who knew him in the Underworld, and figures out a way to recapture what remains of humanity as his slaves [GOING TO NEED A DIFFERENT WAY IN THIS NEW AND GRIMMER WORLD][Total Rethink to bring in humor].

Next...

11) Andy gets the Excalibur alert, and decides that his best chance to find and kill Bill is to become Excalibur's guardian angel.

I see the scene above as a dialogue between two men about a woman both men hope is young and beautiful and who will be grateful to be rescued and protected by them — two men stuck in the same semi-dead, getting a bit smelly body who suddenly realize this reality.

11) Andy [and some other guy] gets the Excalibur alert, and decide that their best chance to find and kill Bill is to become the guardians of a (hopefully) hot angel who once saved humanity.

Next...

12) [BIG CHANGE] Amanda comes out as the goddess and eventual destroyer of the Underworld.

I'm not sure that I'll need to do anything with this, but by the time I've gotten this far in the revision, I'll have the final voices in my head much more clearly, and will be able to make it fit the new tone. So I'm leaving this one unchanged. Onward...

13) Andy (and Needs A Name) comes to Amanda/ Excalibur's call, determined to be her defender.

This brings me pretty much up to the current version. The next scene is the one I'll write this week, and while I don't have the full scope of the voices yet, I can extrapolate from my notes above to write this scene.

14) Jaro and the Binkley Caravan capture a lone cannibal alive, sneaking into their encampment, and capture her, hoping to get information from her about other cannibals -- and discover she's living in a completely different world.

Note here that this week I'll be dropping back to write a NEW scene before an existing scene.

This is not the same as backing up to tinker with or revise existing work.

This is creating something new to your current understanding of what you're writing that fills in a blank area.

NEXT...

The next scene is one I've already written, and it can stand as is, waiting for revision.

15) Bill sees that Amanda/Excalibur is building an army around herself, and joins a Caravan headed to help her.

And then I hit the novel midpoint, where some things need to become clear to the characters and other things need to be introduced to carry me to the end of the book. (Fortunately, setting this up is NEXT week's lesson).

16) * Andy, traveling alone, is attacked by cannibals who confuse him for a zombie (or correctly identify him as one), and he defeats them -- but takes new damage -- AND BIG PIVOTAL MID-POINT ISSUE

So I'll deal with the rest of my Provisional Outline then.

You've seen enough here to see how to do this, so now it's time to do it.

You're going to build out a provisional outline that you can rough out that is NOT what you've already written...

And not what the novel will be when you're done...

You're simply sketching out the best path you can see right now to getting you to the ending of your book according to the story your Muse thinks you're telling right now, while understanding that this CAN change at any time, and that nothing on this outline is in stone.

This is important, so I'm going to break down that sentence above into bullet points, and then give each of those bullet points a question, and then put each of those questions into your worksheet.

- **You're simply sketching out the best path you can see right now**

What's the question here?

What's the path my Muse is pushing for right now?

- **to getting you to the ending of your book**

What's the question here?

How does my understanding of my story TODAY, RIGHT NOW alter this scene's direction toward my proposed ending?

- **according to the story your Muse thinks you're telling right now,**

What's the question here?

What are three to five core features of the story I'm telling TODAY, RIGHT NOW?

Which generates as separate additional question you're going to need to answer today:

What is the core question of my novel?

- while understanding that this CAN change at any time

What's the question here?

Does any feature I have identified as core break in the story if my understanding of it changes tomorrow?

- and that nothing on this outline is in stone

What's the question here?

From what I've figured out so far, am I comfortable that I'll be able to roll with any new changes that my Muse throws at me?

My Demo

So, with your worksheet questions asked, I'm now going to do my demo here:

What's the path my Muse is pushing for right now?

Darkly funny, grimly weird, post-apocalyptic near-future high-tech-trapped-in-no-tech cannibals-zombies-and-artificial-intelligences romantic science fiction.

Yeah.... Sheesh. <smacking own forehead>

Only five people in the whole wide world are likely to want to read this... so I'm probably not going to sell a million copies of this one. But I'm still gonna write the damn thing. Because I love what this is turning into.

How does my understanding of my story TODAY, RIGHT NOW alter this scene's direction toward my proposed ending?

You've already seen my scene-by-scene notes in my demo outline above, so this is where you do that. Put together a text file, and scene by scene write out a single sentence per scene that is your best guess for *what you would have written if you'd known when you started writing what you know now*.

What are three to five core features of the story I'm telling TODAY, RIGHT NOW?

My core features are:

- Post-apocalyptic
- Near-future
- High-tech-trapped-in-low/no-tech
- Cannibals-zombies-and-artificial-intelligences
- Romantic science fiction

Neither *darkly humorous* nor *grimly weird* are Core Features. Both of these elements are tone, and you can go back in and fix tone without doing massive rewrites.

Last weeks “Drop back from ten years to two years” shift was not core either. It changed the level of tech available, but not the essence of the story, which already had a massive loss of tech that folks were recovering from.

Frikkin’ cannibals is core. The **Cannibals** concept changes the way the whole story world works.

Caravans is core. The **Caravans** concept ALSO changes the way the whole story world works.

Writing cannibals into the beginning is going to take some major rewriting of early chapters, as are the walled small towns and the caravans.

Some things are so core as to be non-negotiable. Here’s an example.

This was — from the creation of my artifact — a post-apocalyptic novel, though I’ve never written a post-apocalyptic novel before, and though I did not identify this novel as such until around the place where actual words started hitting the page.

If my Muse said, “Hey, let’s take out the post-apocalyptic stuff,” I would know that was a wrong direction, because that has from the beginning been the main thing the book has been about.

If that goes, I no longer have a story.

THE core question for this novel is:

“What happens if an enchanting technology enslaves humanity... and the AI running it destroys that technology for love of a single human being?”

And having *finally* written out in a clear and beautiful form the core question of this novel, I identify the romance between Jaro and Amanda as the **other** core element of this novel that I cannot remove or break.

So here's the technique I promised.

If you discover that your Muse wants to do something that breaks your core story sentence, WHICH you can identify after you've written a good, clear version of your core story sentence, you say NO.

It's a little technique, but one that will keep you from being driven over the edge by badly wrong new ideas.

NEXT...

Does any feature I have identified as core break in the story if my understanding of it changes tomorrow?

So my happy answer to that right now is, NO. The romance holds, and the post-apocalyptic SF holds.

From what I've figured out so far, am I comfortable that I'll be able to roll with any new changes that my Muse throws at me.

Having now clearly identified the two essential pieces of the story that I cannot break under any circumstances – Post-apocalyptic SF and AI/human romance – my Muse can now clearly see them, too, and will not suggest MASSIVELY wrong directions.

So that's my demo.

Your Turn

Go through this lesson and use my examples to create your own text file Provisional Outline of existing chapters based on your current understanding of your novel, and then do the worksheet to make sure that you and your Muse understand what MUST NOT be broken in any ideas you come up with from now on.

Next Week...

Next time, you'll be identifying your provisional midpoint — the content that brings some things to resolution, that identifies some things that must get worse before they can get better, and that sends your story toward its conclusion.

Why provisional? Because until you've written the ending and know the truth of the story you're writing, things can still change.

But...

You can do this!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Holly".

Holly Lisle

Class Creator, *How to Write a Novel*