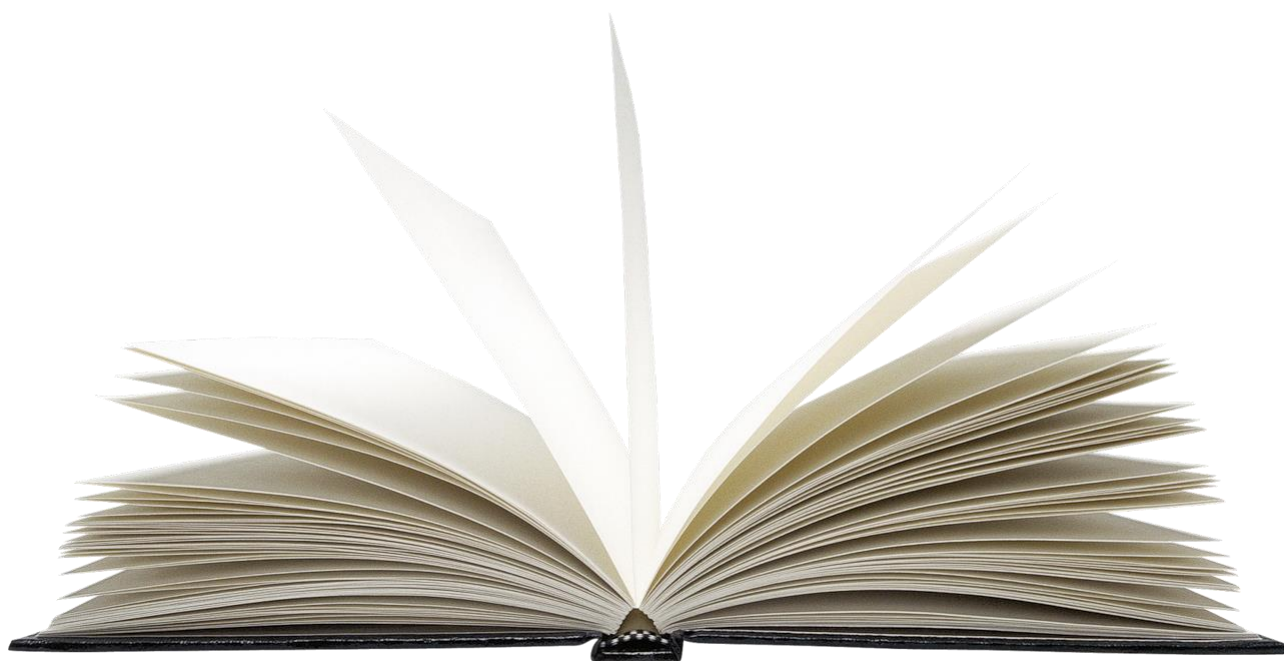# WRITING A NOVEL

Inspiration and exercises to help
get you started on a book

# INTRODUCTION

They say that everyone has a novel in them.  There's something that you need to say, that other people need to read.  The tricky part?  Writing it down.

This pack will help you get started.  This will take you through the stages of what you need to have ready, before you start writing.  This will help you plan, help you get your characters sorted, your setting, and what happens.  After that – it's up to you.

Remember – this is just to get you started.  If you want to mix things up or add something in that isn't here, you do it – if it helps, it's worthwhile.  Your novel belongs to you, and how you write it is your choice.  Different things work for different people.  Find out what you like, and go with that.

Do you write better with music?  With the TV on?  In silence or at a particular time of day?  After exercise or a shower?  Give different things a try.  If it gets frustrating, take a break – sometimes coming back to it with fresh eyes can make a world of difference.

Enjoy it.  Let yourself be excited about it.  You'll need that excitement to carry you through.

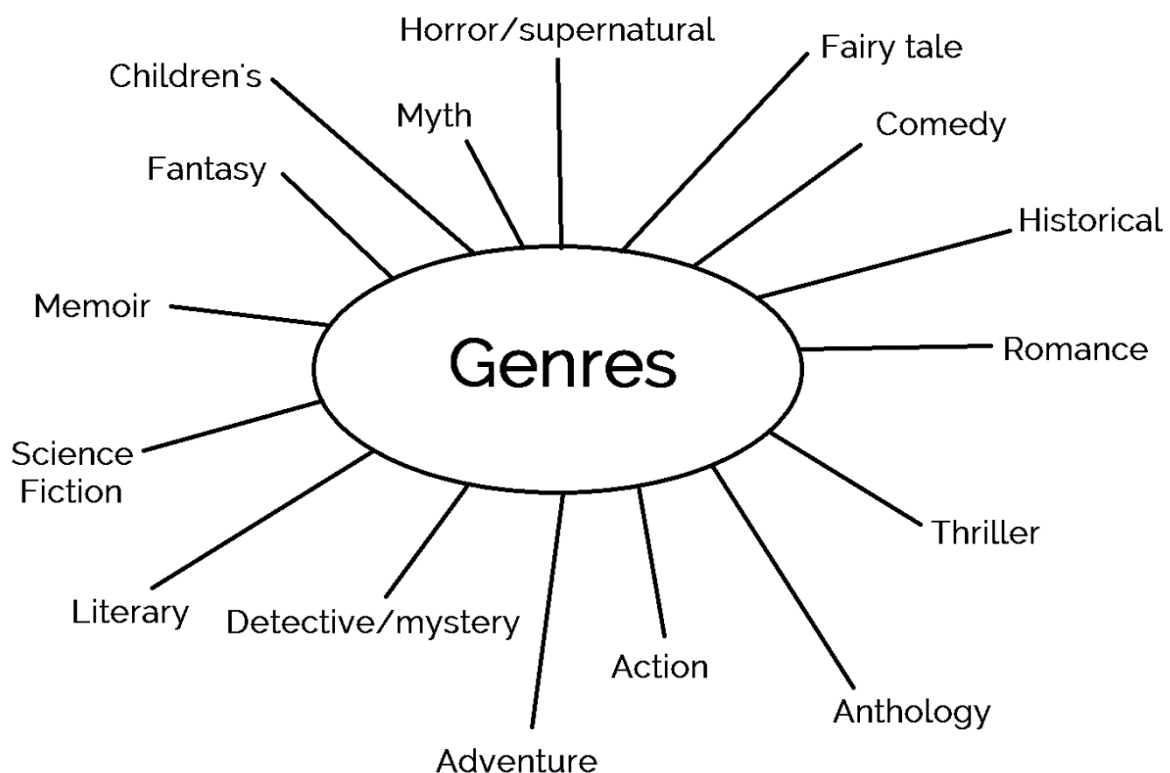And now, if you're ready – let's get started.

# PART 1

## The Plot

'If a story is in you, it has to come out.'
– William Faulkner

First things first: you need a plot – you need the story that you're going to write about. Do you have a storyline already, or are you still thinking? It doesn't matter – this is where we get it right in your head, ready for writing.

What genre is it going to be? That is, what kind of book? Have a look at the spider diagram below and see if your idea falls into one of the categories, or if there's one you like the look of. It doesn't matter if it's a mix – lots of books fall under more than one genre. Check out the glossary at the end of this pack if you want more info about them.

```
                    Horror/supernatural        Fairy tale
      Children's                                      Comedy
              Myth
        Fantasy                                              Historical

   Memoir                                                      Romance
                            Genres
   Science
   Fiction
                                                            Thriller
      Literary    Detective/mystery
                                   Action
                                              Anthology
              Adventure
```

If you've got an idea, great.  If you don't, now's the time to think of something.  Think about what you would want to read, or a film you would love to see.  What would it be about?  Who would the main character be?  Think about your favourite books or films.  If you'd like to read it, chances are someone else will too.  So write it!

If you're struggling with a plot, think of a movie tagline.  Taglines are a quick description that try to hook the reader.  Take a look at these famous ones:

- 'In space, no one can hear you scream.' (Alien, 1979)
- 'You'll never go in the water again.' (Jaws, 1975)
- 'The last man on earth is not alone.' (I am Legend, 2007)
- 'This is the weekend they didn't play golf.' (Deliverance, 1972)
- 'Love never dies.' (Bram Stoker's Dracula, 1992)
- 'For three men, the civil war wasn't hell.  It was practice!' (The Good, The Bad and The Ugly, 1966)
- 'Man is the warmest place to hide.' (The Thing, 1982)
- 'Some memories are best forgotten.' (Memento, 2000)
- 'Unwittingly, he trained a dolphin to kill the President of the United States' (The Day of the Dolphin, 1973 – yeah, this is real)

You don't need to have seen the film to take a decent guess as to what they're about.  Now try a couple of your own.  It doesn't matter how unusual they are (I'm looking at you, Day of the Dolphin).  But getting a quick idea down can sometimes inspire you to more.

At the end of the day, only you can come up with the plot.  But if you need more ideas, just keep writing them down.  Everything you think of, especially things that interest you, that really mean something to you.  Put them on paper, and even if it looks like a jumble of different words today, you might wake up tomorrow and put them together into something great.  **Write the book you want to read.**

## Exercise –
## Plotting

Fill in the questions below to give yourself an outline of the story.  As you write more, it'll be useful to come back to this, to see where you started.  It doesn't matter if this changes – it's just ideas.

1. What genre is your novel?

   ...........................................................................................................................

2. If you had to tell someone 'what happens' in a sentence, what would you say?

   ...........................................................................................................................

   ...........................................................................................................................

3. Write a tagline for it

   ...........................................................................................................................

4. What happens in the beginning? (just a sentence)

   ...........................................................................................................................

5. What happens in the middle? (just a sentence)

   ...........................................................................................................................

6. What happens at the end? (just a sentence)

   ...........................................................................................................................

7. How should this book make someone feel?

   ...........................................................................................................................

8. Why would you want to read this book?

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   ...........................................................................................................................
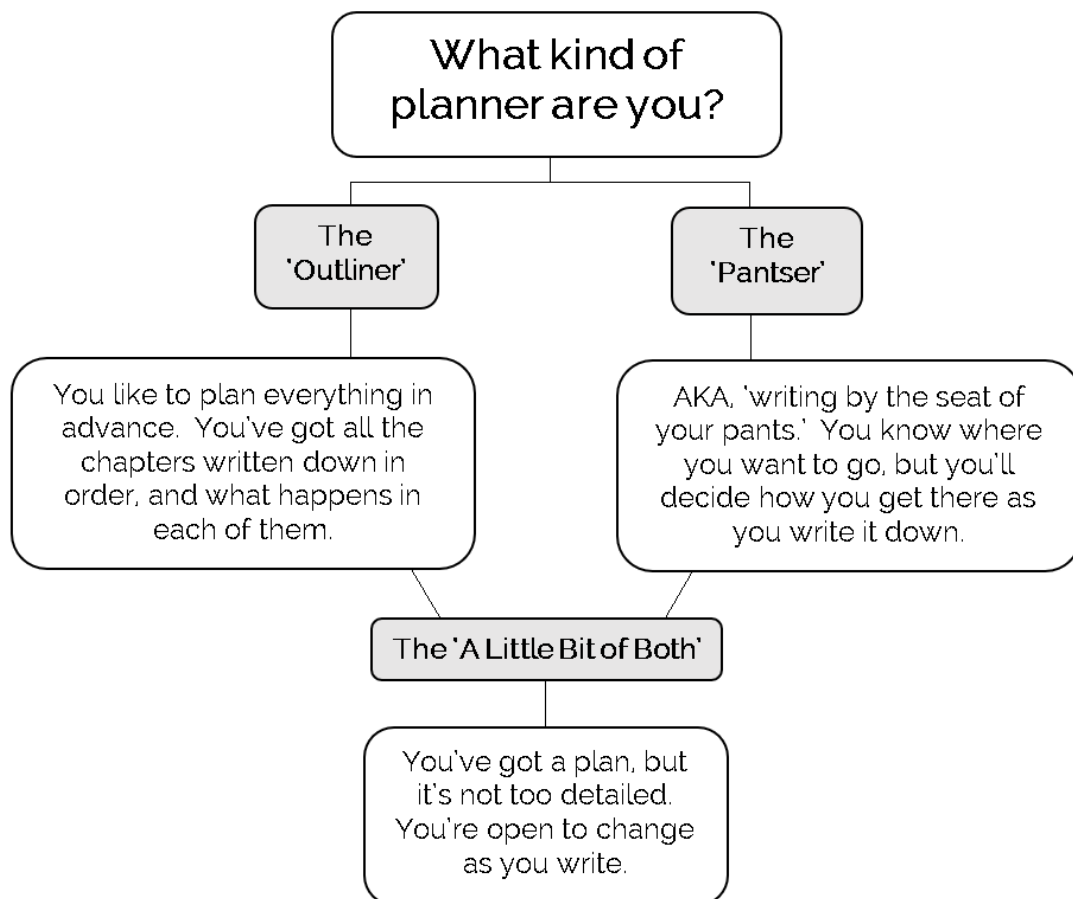
# PART 2

## Planning

'Without leaps of imagination or dreaming, we lose the excitement of possibilities.  Dreaming, after all, is a form of planning'
– Gloria Steinem

So you've got your basic plot written.  Now's the time to go a bit more in depth, and plan out how you're going to write this.  Planning is a great tool to help keep you focused and working towards a goal, but it works differently for different people.  Take a look at the chart below and decide where you fit in.

### What kind of planner are you?

**The 'Outliner'**

You like to plan everything in advance.  You've got all the chapters written down in order, and what happens in each of them.

**The 'Pantser'**

AKA, 'writing by the seat of your pants.'  You know where you want to go, but you'll decide how you get there as you write it down.

**The 'A Little Bit of Both'**

You've got a plan, but it's not too detailed.  You're open to change as you write.

None of the above are wrong!  None of them are bad ways to write.  The important thing is to find the way that works best for you.

You might be an Outliner, maybe a Pantser, or even a Little Bit of Both.  But regardless, you're going to need a structure – a beginning, a middle, and an end.  We touched on this briefly in Part 1, but now it needs more.

- **Exposition (also called introduction):** something happens to trigger the novel.  There's something going on.  What is it?  How does it start?  Introduce your characters and what's happening.
- **Rising action:** building the tension.  We know what's going on now – how does it change/get worse, and what do your characters do?  This will be the longest part of your novel.
- **Climax:** the exciting part – you've been leading up to this, and this is where it all comes together (or falls apart)
- **Falling action:** tidying up the loose ends – where does everyone go from here?  What's the plan now?
- **Resolution:** ending the story.  This, and the falling action, will be shorter parts of the novel.

This is a handy way to break up your story, and will help you move from one point to another.  Don't feel the need to stick to it rigidly – some parts might blur into others.

If you think you're ready, write out how yours fits into each part.  Or you can save this 'til later, when you've built up your ideas a bit more.

### Definition

**Perspective**
The point of view a book is written from.  The most common are first person ('I said, I did) and third person ('he said, she did')

Next you need to decide on your **perspective**, or point of view.  Who is telling this story?  Let's use two examples (it doesn't matter if you haven't read these).

'That afternoon, we went to the hospital.  As we drove out of the street in the car, I saw Mina, sitting in the tree in her garden.  She had a notebook in her lap and she was writing or drawing.  She looked at us, and she waved, but she didn't smile.'
 - from *Skellig* by David Almond, 1998

This is written in the **first person**, as though the main character, Michael, is speaking to us.  The benefits of this style are that you are really up close and personal to the thoughts and feelings of the character.  They tell you their thoughts and what they see, and they can even lie to the reader.  The problem with it is, you only know what they know – you don't know what anyone else is thinking.  Here's the next one:

'M. Hercule Poirot was a little late in entering the luncheon-car on the following day.  He had risen early, breakfasted almost alone, and had spent the morning going over the notes of the case that was recalling him to London.  He had seen little of his travelling companion.'
 - From *Murder on the Orient Express* by Agatha Christie, 1934

This is written in the **third person**.  It isn't told directly from anyone's point of view.  You can still focus on one character and consider their thoughts and feelings; 'he thought this, he wondered that,' so you can still have that familiarity with your main character.  It can also add a little mystery, in that you can choose what to let readers know – you don't have to give things away if you don't want.

Which would work better for your novel, first or third person?  If you're not sure, try the first chapter in both – you can always change it later.  First person is generally considered easier for the first-time novelist.  On the flip side, most best-selling books are written in third person.  But the main thing is to use what fits best.

Don't worry about detailing your characters too much yet – we'll come to that in part four.  But if you've got some thoughts, write them down – you can never have too many ideas.

Now, if you're a 'Pantser,' you might be ready to dive straight into the next stage.  But if you want to try some planning, have a go at one of the two exercises below, whichever you prefer, using the blank paper at the back.  You can also come back to this a bit later, if you want to do the next parts first to get your setting and characters ready.

- Write out a list of chapters, starting with the first one, and the last one.  This gives you a starting point, and where you want to end up.  Fill in what you can in between – if you've got parts that you know you want to put in, slot them in where you can.  This will help you see where you are missing bits, and where you want to connect some parts to others.

   OR:

- Write out the entire plot of the story, in as much detail as you can, as if you were explaining it to someone who didn't know anything about it.  Think of what they would need to know to make them want to read it.

You'll be able to add more to this as you go along.  Don't worry if you don't have much to go on yet – that will come.
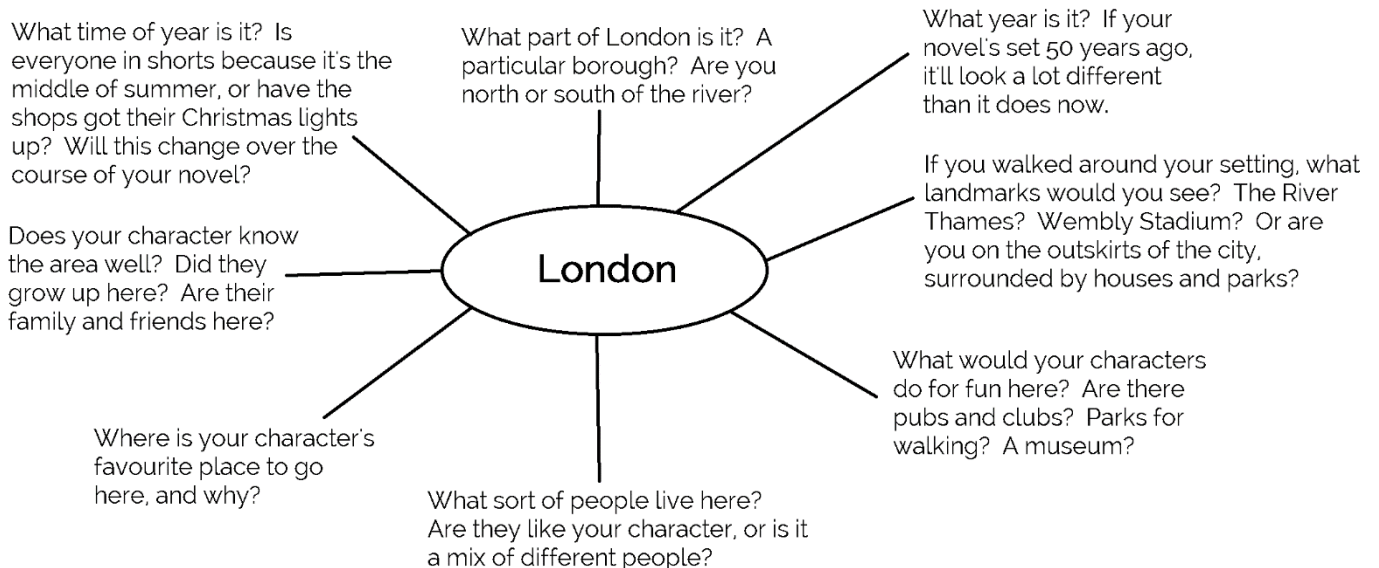
# PART 3

## Setting

'This is your world.  Show me what you see.'

Now you've got your plan, and you've got an idea of what will happen.  Next you need to think about setting.  Where does the story take place?  Is it in your hometown?  A foreign country?  Somewhere made-up?  Have you seen your setting with your own eyes, in pictures, or in your head?  Wherever it is, you need to know it well.

Let's say it's set in London, just as an example.  Take a look at the spider diagram below, and think how you would answer them, if your story was set in London.

What time of year is it?  Is everyone in shorts because it's the middle of summer, or have the shops got their Christmas lights up?  Will this change over the course of your novel?

What part of London is it?  A particular borough?  Are you north or south of the river?

What year is it?  If your novel's set 50 years ago, it'll look a lot different than it does now.

Does your character know the area well?  Did they grow up here?  Are their family and friends here?

If you walked around your setting, what landmarks would you see?  The River Thames?  Wembly Stadium?  Or are you on the outskirts of the city, surrounded by houses and parks?

**London**

What would your characters do for fun here?  Are there pubs and clubs?  Parks for walking?  A museum?

Where is your character's favourite place to go here, and why?

What sort of people live here?  Are they like your character, or is it a mix of different people?

On the next page, there's a blank diagram.  Fill it in with information about your setting that might be important.  Your novel might have a few different settings – you can use this technique for all of them.
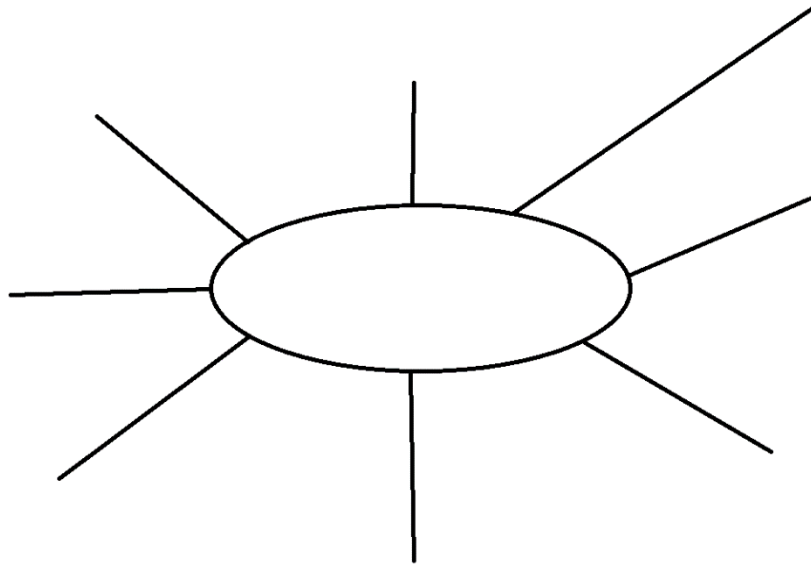
So you've got the basics of your setting.  As you go on, you'll probably have more.  As long as you know it well, you'll be able to describe it, and it will feel real to the reader.

That brings us onto the description of your setting.  Everyone knows what a tree looks like.  If you're describing a tree, how is it different to any other tree?  How can you write about it and make it interesting?  Have a look at the below.

'It was an old thing, gnarled and dark.  Branches twisting round each other like old fingers, so many warts and lumps they put grandma's hands to shame.'

What do you get from this?  You know the tree is old and twisted, maybe at night it might be a bit creepy.  But you also learn that the character has a grandma.  You can do this every so often – drop in little bits of info on the character, or the area, some background to add depth.  You don't have to do it a lot, but it can help in the right circumstances.  Take a look at the next one.

'George Cunningham was a large man in his early sixties, red-faced, blue-suited, sweaty-pink-handed.  Years working in sales had taught him to speak as fast as he humanly could,

forcing in as much information as possible before someone slammed the phone down on the other end.'

Characters are a part of your setting too, especially ones that don't play a big role, but just add to the environment. In the above, we learn what George does for a living, and we assume he's loud and brash. It could've just said, 'George was about sixty-one, he worked in sales and he spoke too fast.' But the description above is a little more interesting. 'Sweaty-pink-handed' might not be something you say every day, but here it gives you a real image of his clammy hands. Don't be afraid to be daring with your description – make it different, make it something no one's read before.

Below are some subjects – try writing a description. Come back to this later as you find out more important parts of your setting.

1. Tree

    ..................................................................................................................................

    ..................................................................................................................................

2. The local postman

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    ..................................................................................................................................

3. Old house at the end of the street

    ..................................................................................................................................

    ..................................................................................................................................

4. Woman who lives on your character's road

    ..................................................................................................................................

    ..................................................................................................................................

5. A photo your character keeps in their wallet

    ..................................................................................................................................

    ..................................................................................................................................

# PART 4

## Characters

'Whether a character in your novel is full of choler, bile, phlegm, blood or plain old buffalo chips, the fire of life is in there too, as long as that character lives.'
– James Alexander Thom

So: you need a main character, and you need to know them.  Think of them like a real person – they have a personality, and strengths and weaknesses.  Even if the reader doesn't always see it, you know it's there.  This will help you create a realistic, multi-dimensional character who readers want to read about.

## Understanding your character
- Think of the plot.  Why are they important to it?  Why are they the main character rather than the guy next door?
- What are they like at the start?  Do the events of the story lead to them changing, or becoming a better person?
- What are they trying to achieve?  Are they trying to make something happen, or stop it happening?  Are they searching for something?  This doesn't have to be a person or an object.  It can be more abstract – a better life, happiness, something they think they're missing.
- What do they do to find it?  Are they actively trying to move forwards, or are things happening around them and they just respond?  How do they feel about the way things are changing?

### Definition

**Protagonist and antagonist**
The protagonist is your main character.  The antagonist is the main villain, the who or what that is in their way.

It's not just a main character you'll need.  There'll be more: supporting characters, good and bad.  The protagonist might have family, friends, colleagues.  There might be other people caught up in events like them, who'll all need personalities and backgrounds.  Then you might have an antagonist – the main thing standing in your character's way.

When you think of an antagonist, you might think of some famous villains – Professor Moriarty from Sherlock Holmes, The Joker from Batman, or Count Dracula.  These are all great villains.  They have something that makes them stand out and makes them a tough fight for the main character – Professor Moriarty is an evil genius, the Joker causes chaos wherever he goes, and Dracula… well, he's a vampire.

But your antagonist doesn't have to be a person.  Think of *Jaws*, where it's a shark.  Or a disaster movie where it's a tornado or an ice age or a meteor.  It could be technology, or something supernatural, or a society that's against them.  It could even be a part of the main character themselves – in Edgar Allan Poe's short story, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, what stands again the protagonist is his own mind, working against him.  Be bold, and don't worry if it's something you've not read before.  Now's a great time to try things out, even if you change it later.

Check out the below exercise to start getting your characters sorted.

## Exercise – Character sheet

Answer the below questions about your character.  This information might not all be in your book, but it will help you get to know them better.

If you're not sure about some, don't worry.  You can always come back to them later.

(You can use this sheet for all of your characters, not just your main one.)

# Character Sheet

1. What's their name?

...................................................................................................................................

2. How old are they?

...................................................................................................................................

3. Where are they from?

...................................................................................................................................

4. What do they look like?

...................................................................................................................................

5. Do they have family?  Who?

...................................................................................................................................

6. Do they have a best friend?  Who?

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7. Do they have a partner?  Who?

...................................................................................................................................

8. Do they have a job?  If so, what?

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9. Distinguishing features? (scars, tattoos etc.)

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10. Type of clothes?

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11. Do they have any mannerisms/habits?

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12. Are they loud or quiet or in between?

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13. What is their greatest strength?

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14. What is their biggest fault?

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15. What is their greatest fear?

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16. What is their biggest secret?

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17. What is their best memory?

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18. Their worst memory?

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19. What do they want in life more than anything else?

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20. How would you describe them in one word?

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21. What's their favourite hobby?

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22. What makes them happy?

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23. What sort of music do they like?

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24. What do other people think of them?

........................................................................................................................

25. What is their most treasured possession?

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26. If they had a superpower, what would it be and why?

........................................................................................................................

If you think of anymore, write them down.

# PART 5

## Conflict

'You take people, you put them on a journey, you give them peril, you find out who they really are.'
– Joss Whedon

Conflict is what makes your story. It's the problem that your main character is involved in, and how they overcome it. It's how they change along the way. This is your problem. Take a look at this one:

'Frodo must take the One Ring to Mordor, to destroy it in the fires of Mount Doom, to save humanity.'

This is from *The Lord of the Rings* by JRR Tolkien. It doesn't matter if you haven't read it or seen the movie – you can get enough just by reading the quote above. You have a character: Frodo. You have a plot: taking the ring to Mordor to destroy it. What's left is your conflict. That is, what's in Frodo's way?

If you know the book or film, you'll know what that is. If you haven't, it's this: a dark lord with an all-seeing eye, a wizard who's gone bad, armies of evil creatures and dragons that carry undead riders, all intent on getting the ring before Frodo can destroy it. Now, you don't need anything that intense, depending on what you're writing. But you do need something. Now let's look at this one:

'Two years ago, Cecil's brother died. As much as he doesn't want to admit that it's changed him, his life *has* changed: he's left his job, he's lost his girlfriend, and he doesn't know what to do with himself.'

This story, *A Pair of Ragged Claws*, is about Cecil's day to day life, but it's troubled by what's happened in the past. His conflict is more subtle – it's how he feels, and how he can't get past his brother's death. His own sadness, and the way it's held him back, is his conflict.

# What's your conflict?

Think of your main character, and how they fit into your plot. What are they trying to achieve? Where do they start, and where do they end up? Who or what is in their way? Is it in their way on purpose, for personal reasons, or is it something bigger than that? Who helps the protagonist and why? Are they friends, or are they trying to achieve something too? Is the conflict something that affects a lot of people, or only the main character? Some of this will be similar to what we covered in the previous part, but now's the time to really tie it in with your plot. Fill in some quick notes below:

What does your character want?

What is in their way and why?

How will they try to overcome this?

Will anyone help them? Who?

How does your character succeed?

Is your character happy at the end?

You want to get to the stage where you can write a sentence describing the plot of your story like the one for *The Lord of the Rings*, on the last page. This is enough to get you started – you can fill in the rest as you write, because things will probably change, the more you do.

Really, the conflict is just another part of your plot – it's the main part. But it's what the reader will want to know about the most. It's what will make them want to read the book, and keep on reading it. If you can make it interesting, people will be interested.

Remember

Don't worry if yours doesn't fit exactly into these categories – this is just a basis that you can change to fit your needs.
Maybe your character is the villain and the antagonist is the good guy? Maybe your character is the one standing in someone's way? Switch the words round however you need to!

# Part 6

## Getting Started

'The scariest moment is always just before you start.'
– Stephen King

So you've got a plot, you've done some planning, you've got your setting, your characters and the conflict.  Yes or no: are you ready to start?  If it's a no, that's fine – take some more time planning, get yourself ready, look back over what you've done and add what you need to.  If it's a yes – let's go.

First line – this is what you need to hook the reader.  If you've got a great first line, they want to keep reading.  Let's start with that.

Here are some first lines from famous books:
-   'It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.' (George Orwell, *1984*)
-   'This is my favourite book in all the world, though I have never read it.' (William Goldman, T*he Princess Bride*)
-   'It was the day my grandmother exploded.' (Iain Banks, *The Crow Road*)
-   'It was Tuesday and the dishwasher was giving birth.' (Cecil Cavender, *A Pair of Ragged Claws*)

All these novels are about very different subjects, but they have one thing in common: their first lines make you say 'what?'  They immediately put a question in the reader's mind, that makes them want to read more, to find out the answer.

Let's practise writing some first lines.  Below are a few story plots – try writing their first line.  Be imaginative, be bold – you can write what you like, about who you like.

1.  A man falls out of the sky and lands in someone's garden.  He says he's an angel – but who's going to believe him?

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2. Two children find a strange creature living in their garage.

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3. After a chance encounter with an old friend, a woman keeps having strange dreams.

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Now try writing the first line to your novel. Remember – you can always change this. It doesn't need to be perfect. You just want to get off to a good start, that makes you want to keep writing.

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Where is going to go from here? How is this first chapter going to pan out, and how is it going to lead on to the second chapter? Think about the plot now, and how it's going to move forwards from here.

If you know how your second chapter starts, write until you get to it. If you don't, write your first chapter until it comes to a natural stopping point – when you've said everything you need to say about what is going on at that moment.

Don't feel like you need to put in all the background detail – this will happen naturally over the course of the book, and it's good to leave mystery, to keep the reader guessing.

So now you have the first line written, and you've got somewhere to go with it.  You've got your plan, your setting, your characters, your conflict.  Now, it's up to you.  You've got a novel to write.

## Keeping Going

This isn't going to be a quick job, and sometimes you might feel like it's too much, or you're not happy with what you're writing.  That's normal – it happens to every writer.  But it will pass, and it's important to remember that.  Here's a few things to keep you inspired, when you're not feeling the same excitement you did when you started.

- Remind yourself of why you started this – there was something you wanted to say.  Don't let that go to waste.

- We are our own worst critics.  It's never as bad as you think.  If in doubt, remember these wise words by Ernest Hemingway, one of the most famous authors in American history: 'The first draft of everything is sh*t.'

- It's ok to take a break and come back to it later.  That can be hours, days, weeks or months – there's no rush.  Having some space can refresh your mind and give you time to find more ideas.

- If you're stuck on a particular part, don't feel the need to stick with it until you get it done.  Write a later chapter that you're excited about, or a funny scene between your two favourite characters, or quotes you want to put in.  Even if you don't use it in the final version, it can help keep you inspired and might give you some ideas you hadn't thought of.

- Only you can write this.

# TIPS

- It can help to set aside a time for writing, as part of a routine. It's up to you when that is. Some people write best in the morning, some in the evening – some in little bits over the day. When it is doesn't matter, but it will help it feel more normal, and help you stick to it, if you have it as a regular part of your day.

- They say 'write about what you know,' but this is open to interpretation – you don't have to have experienced everything you write. Stephen King hasn't experienced all the monsters he puts in his horror stories. But, he has been scared – that's how he knows how to put fear onto a page. You can turn any emotion into a story.

- It's so much easier to improve a chapter if you've already written it. Write out what you want to say first, and then you can go back and make it better later. Nobody likes what they write first time. 'First get it writ, then get it right.'

- They say that there are only seven stories in the world – every story has been written before. It doesn't matter if yours is similar to one that's already been written. The important thing is to find a different way to say it, to add things to yours that make it unique.

- Keep writing things down. Funny things you hear, dreams that you remember. You might be able to use it later.

- Reread what you've written. This will help remind you of details you can bring up later, so everything flows and makes sense. Plus, it can be nice reading bits you like, and reminding yourself of parts that you're proud of.

# Good Luck

Well done on reaching the end of the pack.  If you've made it this far, I hope you've come up with some ideas that you're happy with, and that you've enjoyed the process.

It can be a hard slog, writing a novel, but it's not something you need to rush.  You can spend years on this, if you want.  You can leave it for a while and come back with fresh ideas – it's always up to you.

Enjoy it.  If you're not enjoying it, take a break.  Start again when the inspiration comes back.

And remember, it doesn't have to be perfect.  It doesn't even have to be good.  What's important is getting it written down.  Once it's on the page, you can go back and change it however many times you want – but you can only do that when you've written it down.

**Write the book you want to read.**

Best of luck.

# Glossary of Genres

- **Horror/supernatural:** scary, dark, paranormal creatures. *Stephen King: IT*
- **Fairy tale:** stories for kids?  Not always.  Disney might have done most of them, but a lot of the real tales are very dark. Cinderella is a lot gorier in the original!  *The Brothers Grimm: Sleeping Beauty*
- **Comedy:** funny!  That doesn't mean you can't have a deep story – comedy goes really well with sad or scary. *Bruce Robinson: Withnail and I*
- **Historical:** Romans, Vikings, battles.  Usually quite fact-based, even if the characters are fictional.  *Bernard Cornwell: Sharpe*
- **Romance:** love and longing.  The journey to being with someone.  *Jane Austen: Pride and Prejudice*
- **Thriller:** an exciting plot, often involving secrecy and spying.  *Lee Child: Jack Reacher*
- **Anthology:** lots of short stories in one.  Great if you've got a lot of smaller ideas that won't necessarily make a novel.  *Aesop: Aesop's Fables.*
- **Action:** similar to thriller, but based more on exciting action sequences.  *Veronica Roth: Divergent*
- **Adventure:** similar to action/thriller, but the danger and excitement here will usually be a bit more fun, and usually happier.  *Mark Twain: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
- **Detective/mystery:** crime-based whodunnit, working out who is responsible.  *Agatha Christie: Poirot*

- **Literary:** often called 'books without a plot,' these are more based on characters than storyline. *JD Salinger: The Catcher in the Rye*
- **Science Fiction:** futuristic, what life might be like in another time. Often involves space or alien life, but it doesn't have to. *HG Wells: The War of The Worlds*
- **Memoir:** an account of your own life. Not covered so much in this pack as we look at more fictional writing, but great to write if you're inspired. *Barack Obama: Dreams from My Father*
- **Fantasy:** fantastic lands and magical creatures, often with an adventure involved. *JRR Tolkien: The Lord of The Rings*
- **Children's:** Something appropriate for younger audiences. *David Almond: Skellig*
- **Myth**: involving Gods or superheroes, such as the ones from Ancient Greece and Rome. *Homer: Odyssey*

# Feedback

If you enjoyed this pack, we'd like to know!  Fill this in if you're happy to let us know your thoughts, and send it back to Activities.  You don't have to put your name on it, if you don't want to.

Did you enjoy it?  What did you like or not like?

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What there anything you'd like to see in here, that wasn't?

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Any other comments?

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Would you like any other packs?  If so, what?

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