

Get The Story Down

As I sit at the keyboard drumming my fingers on the keys trying to think of something to say, I remember the first time I sat in front of a typing device.

The device was an antique black Royal typewriter my mother had stashed away. I cleaned off the dust and put in a new ribbon. As was typical of these typewriters, the keys would get plugged with ribbon particles or a key would strike too high or too low. I inserted a fresh piece of paper and struck all the keys to test the strike pattern to make sure each key was reasonably lining up. The strike was good and the pattern was acceptable. I typed a test line and used the carriage return to check the alignment. I typed a second line for conformity.

I removed the test paper, inserted a fresh piece of paper and set the right/left margins. I used another blank sheet behind the paper I would type on with a thick black line drawn near the bottom to alert me when I was close to the bottom of the paper. I was ready to go with my fingers set in place, remembering the lessons learned in high school freshman typing class to place your fingers on the middle line of letters, the right index finger aligning on the "J" and the left index finger aligning on the "F." The only thing left was to write.

The words flowed from my mind to the page, but unfortunately not too quickly. What I had was a jumbled mess of typos. Missed punctuation. Words connected and general misspellings. At least the margins were in tact. Every time the bell rang, I whirled the carriage return over and hit the keys for the next line. I had the same problem writing in longhand. My thoughts were always ahead of my ability to write. I also had the additional problem of trying to read my handwriting. At least the typed words were easier to read.

My first goal was to continue typing and at least get thoughts and general ideas down on paper. I would concern myself with the clean up later. Remember, this wasn't a word processor. It was a manual typewriter and anything needed fixing would have to be completely retyped. A write first, do the work later concept. Any changes to the typewritten page would require a complete retype of the entire page. If the page ran over or now contained fewer words the next and possibly subsequent pages would have to be retyped. Not a simple task.

I decided to handwrite an outline of the story I was trying to create. A separate page of characters. And settings I could refer to while I was typing. By doing so I had the basic story on paper. By using the outline, the typing was more focused and I was able to concentrate on the story while I was striking the keys. By doing this, I didn't have to create the story while I was typing it. Although the results were rather rough, at least I had a basis with which to work.

The answer to constant retyping was a combination of both handwriting and typing. Basically taking those typed pages, sitting in a comfy chair with pen and paper in hand and marking up those pages. Adding where needed. Inserting handwritten pages and crossing out what no longer worked. Thereby, building another draft of the story to work with. I had my story on paper.

When this article is finished, I will use spell check, make changes and insert and delete words and phrases. What a handy device this computer is for writing. I can type as fast as I think and no matter what junk appears on the screen, I can clean it up rather easily without having to retype the whole page.

In fact, I just used the backspace key to clean up the last sentence.

How much simpler it would have been in 1977 to have a computer to key my words into. My only solution back then was to create a first draft of typewritten words. Review the work. Make notes throughout the manuscript, including handwritten pages or passages and hopefully get a partially completed manuscript. Only then would I start retyping from page one. I actually did it four times before finally sending my first manuscript out to an agent.

Another option available to a writer was to hire someone to do the typing enabling the writers to do the writing.

A good story no matter how badly written, is still a good story and it can be fixed. The most important aspect of writing is a good story. Even non-fiction needs a credible premise. Everything else can be fixed.

Your main objective is to get your story down on paper – screen displayed word file. No matter how rough or how disjointed. Get the story on paper. Use an outline or notes. Get a first draft on paper rather than spending time creating, flowing, developing or tightening as you write. Get the story down first! Now, do you like the story? Is it what you thought would be the actual story? Is there a beginning, middle and end? All stories, no matter if it is 100 words or 100,000 words, needs a beginning, middle and end. Do the characters work? Will the reader know who the characters are and what they mean to the story? Now it's time to get to work.

For my manuscript I had the first ten chapters outlined before I struck a key on my typewriter – by this time I had bought an electric correcting type. Eventually I ended up reworking and rewriting six of those ten chapters. But, I had developed a starting point.

As you may have gathered, I started my writing quite some time ago. My manuscript went through several rewrites, actually a complete retype of the entire manuscript before I had a finished draft. Until a manuscript is published, it is always a draft. However, life's distractions, raising children and pursuing a career forced my writing to be put on the back burner. When events brought it back to the surface, I decided to at least get my manuscript on the computer.

Again, I just pounded the manuscript in as it was, making a few obvious changes. I printed the first draft and worked on the draft, marking it up, adding subtracting, writing on the back of pages. Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite. Once again I sat in front of the computer keying the changes or deletions as I went. I next reviewed the manuscript chapter by chapter. I have a technique whereby I review the chapters out of order so as not to get lulled into the story. I can take each chapter apart and work with it directly without the burden of the story pushing me forward. I find it works quite well.

What an asset the computer is for making changes to the original pile of paper sitting on my desk. And what an experience it has been revisiting the story. I've added about eighty pages and hopefully cleaned up many of the passages and strengthened my characters and settings. The manuscript is currently in front of another set of eyes for editing. The good news, I had the story down or at least a concept of what I wanted and the direction I wanted to go with my story. All I had to do now was the work to get it ready for the reader.

At a writer's conference I met another writer who said he had the first chapter completed, proofed, edited and ready to go. I asked him about the rest of the story and he said he hadn't started it yet. I calmly mentioned, once you get into the story it may change the aspect of the first chapter. He gave me a look and smiled and said "I don't think it will happen." We left it there. I mean, how can you be sure the rest of your story won't effect the first chapter structure. I'm sure I've changed my first chapter on many occasions.

The point, of course, is you need to get the whole story down, not just a chapter to determine where you are going. I did a presentation on this topic at a roundtable discussion. The crux of the presentation was the best course of events is to get a whole story down on paper, before you start proofing, editing or finishing a chapter. You can't tell if your first chapter works until you finish your last chapter. Only then can you tell if it flows together. Once you have the complete story written down, you can start to fill in the pieces. Strengthen the characters, the settings, the connection. Add a character, a setting. Really start to tighten the work. Make all the parts you've written flow together.

I always fancied myself to be a story teller learning to be a writer. What this means simply is I have to make you the reader appreciate the story I just told you. A simple example would be if you are with a group of friends from high school and you get to talking about one of your classmates. You will all know and appreciate who you are talking about. But If you are with strangers and one of them starts talking about a classmate from their high school you would not have a reference point to relate to. Was the person Fat? Skinny? A football hero? A wiz at chess? As a writer you have to fill in those blanks. You have to paint the picture for them. While I may be a great story teller, it is making you understand and appreciate the story I am telling you that makes me a writer.

Getting the story down on paper is a great first step. You have the story formulated and a great place to start the work. Unfortunately I have met too many writers who don't even get that far. They are caught up in a character development, or a setting creation, time, space, all so many distractions to allow them to finish. First and foremost get your story completed. Worry about completing your character(s) later. Creating the settings. Bridging the gaps. Flowing the chapters together. All of this can be done after. First and foremost: Get the Story Down.

I now have this article down on paper. Next, I'll go through and correct the obvious mistakes. I'll also do a spell and grammar check. I'll read it over several times before I feel it's ready. I'll have another set of eyes look at it. I usually do. And I'll do a final edit before I submit it. Of course, the editor will have the final say. But, at this point I have the article on paper.

Whether this article is good is still to be determined. What the final draft will look like might be quite different. But, I'm finished with what I needed to say at this point. Time to get to work. The article is down on paper.