

FIRST DRAFT IN 30 DAYS

Excerpt

INTRODUCTION

Making the 30-Day Method Work for You

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MY THANKS

While I'd love to claim this book was borne entirely out of my own wisdom, alas, I'll concede to having quite a few generous hands that helped sand off all the rough edges:

Kelly Nickell, my fantastic editor at Writer's Digest Books, who helped me develop this method in a way that makes sense to more than just myself!

Marshall Cook, writers' reference author extraordinaire, as well as my mentor on one of the earliest forms of this project. Thanks for helping me put together the proposal the first time around, then agreeing to critique, review it, and review it again.

Christine DeSmet, a fellow author and friend who graciously agreed to give the book an advance review. I can't thank you enough for all your invaluable suggestions, Chris.

Christine Spindler, who believed in this book from the very first time I ever mentioned it online (back in the days when it was simply an ambitious idea so many others show down as too lofty). May our writing partnership flourish for many long years.

The **WisRWA** authors who allowed me to give a "mini workshop" of this method at their retreat before I'd ever written the book.

And, finally, to my sister, **Linda Derkez**, with whom my desire to be a writer grew to the point that nothing else would ever do.

“Credit belongs to ... the man who actually strives to do the deeds, who knows the great enthusiasm and knows the great devotion, who spends himself on a worthy cause, who, at best, knows in the end the triumph of great achievement. And who, at worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly ...”

—Teddy Roosevelt

Imagine you could write the first draft of a novel in only thirty days. Imagine you could figure out how long it would take to complete each step *down to the day*—that you could set accurate goals that would allow you to maintain a constant momentum in your writing career. Imagine writing quality novels—*each and every time*—that no editor in his right mind could turn down. Everything you need is within your grasp. As you complete the 30-day method explained in this book, you’re going to discover much about yourself and your abilities.

My 30-day method for outlining a novel eliminates many of the problems that plague fiction writers. Why dig for plots blindly when, with a little preparation, you can craft something worthwhile from start to finish? Why go through countless, lengthy drafts of a novel when you can create an outline so complete that it actually qualifies as the first draft? Why revise hundreds of pages of a complicated manuscript when you can revise a snapshot of your novel that’s a quarter of the novel’s length? Using an outline can *significantly* reduce the time it takes you to complete a project from start to finish—sometimes by more than half.

The method contained in *First Draft in 30 Days* will work for *any* genre of fiction. The method is good for *any* type of writer, whether you’ve just started writing or you’ve been at it for twenty-five years. It will work for you if you who want clear direction from start to finish, and it will work for you if you simply want to use parts of the system to enhance your own way of writing. It will work for you if you are already productive and successful but yearn to take the world by storm.

You may be under the mistaken impression that you can’t use an outline stifles your creativity, that you can’t be productive in every aspect of your writing life. If you have never worked with an outline before or prefer a more leisurely method of working as you embark on what you see as a spiritual journey, adhering to this structured process may sound downright impossible—and in some cases, even horrifying. As you’ll see, there’s no *wrong* way to write a book, but there are *ineffective* ways of writing. Only you can decide if this method is for you. If you’re not sure, try this method once (though it’s best to try it at least two or three times) and see if it makes a big difference in what you’re able to accomplish.

THE GOAL OF THE 30-DAY METHOD

The outline you'll complete using the 30-day method will become a snapshot of your novel. After finishing a full outline, you should feel two things: (1) that you've got the makings of an entire book (your story should feel complete, solid, exciting, and wholly satisfying) and (2) that you still desperately want to write the book you've outlined.

A first draft *outline* completed using the 30-day method is equivalent to the first draft of a *manuscript*. Because you've revised it so thoroughly, it reads with all the completeness and excitement of a finished novel. Using your outline as you write the first draft of your book (which, in almost all cases, will be the *final* draft, needing only minor editing and polishing) should be so easy, you might even feel a little guilty about it. You will have done all the hard work creating the outline.

Throughout this book, we'll work on the assumption that the first draft of your book isn't a fully completed draft in the traditional sense, but instead a comprehensive outline—your first, whole glimpse of the book and a snapshot of what it will be once finished. The outline you create over the next thirty days will become the foundation upon which your entire novel will come to rest. This method is a way to lay out the full course of the story as it flows from beginning to end. Your first draft is in *outline* form, not yet a fully realized manuscript. The first time you sit down to begin the actual writing process, you will create your second—and in some cases, *final*—draft. (I also call this your first *full* draft.)

YOUR COMMITMENT TO THE 30-DAY METHOD

Despite its flexibility, the 30-day method requires a great deal of commitment from you as a writer. The first thing you need in order to become a productive writer is self-discipline. This method will give that to you in spades—if you're willing to dedicate yourself to doing your part. I won't pull any punches with you: Not everyone will be able to complete a first draft outline in exactly thirty days. Does that mean you'll never be able to do it? No, it doesn't mean that at all. This method, like all methods, requires a sufficient amount of practice. The *longer* you use it, the *more* you use it, the more time and effort you'll eventually shave off your outlining schedule. In the future, you may even notice it takes you considerably less time to write the first full draft of your book.

Does it mean you've failed if it takes you ninety days instead of thirty? Of course not. If you need more time (or less) to perform certain steps in the process, you can adjust your schedule easily. But this method will probably make you work harder than you've ever worked before. Some will enjoy the challenge. Others will use the method while setting their own deadlines for each step. And still others won't be willing to allow their muse to be harnessed in this way. Find what works for you over the long haul, not simply for the moment. Even if you find the next thirty days difficult, I encourage you to continue using this method for all of your projects. I promise you it will get easier with experience.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

First Draft in 30 Days is broken down into ten chapters, followed by four appendices. In chapter one, we'll discuss the various schedules that make up the 30-day method and its six crucial stages. We'll also explore some brainstorming techniques because brainstorming is an essential part of this entire process.

Chapters two through seven will take you step by step through the six principle stages of the 30-day method. Each stage is broken down into a certain number of days during which different segments of your outline will be developed, combined, and revised. Each chapter starts with a review of the schedule and prepares you for the work ahead.

If you already have a completed manuscript, you may want to read chapter eight before reading chapters two through seven. This chapter will show you how to use the 30-day method to outline an already completed manuscript. By going back and outlining your completed manuscript, you can build on its strengths and eliminate its weaknesses, since the process of outlining will show you exactly where the story needs work.

Chapter nine will take you through the process of using your completed outline to write your manuscript. It will also discuss how to use writing and revision schedule sheets to keep yourself on track.

Chapter ten will show you how the structuring concepts of the 30-day method can also be used to shape your career. In addition, you'll learn how to use goal sheets to stay focused on each of your projects.

The four appendices contain all the supplemental materials you'll need to work your way through the 30-day method.

Appendix A contains a glossary that includes key outlining terms discussed within this book. If you ever get confused about what a term means, just consult the glossary.

Appendix B contains all the schedules necessary to complete the 30-day method for a new book idea or for one already in some form of development. Overview and step-by-step schedules are included as well. The schedules contain columns where you can include specific dates and notes for yourself as you work.

Appendix C contains the worksheets referenced in chapters two through nine. (In those chapters, you'll see completed worksheet samples based on what some of today's best-sellers may have looked like in outline form.)

Appendix D includes the career goal worksheets discussed in chapter ten.

UNDERSTANDING THE 30-DAY METHOD SCHEDULE

We'll discuss the 30-day method schedules again and again throughout this book. Understanding what's happening on each day of the process will help you to stay focused and on track over the next thirty days. Keep in mind that as you become more experienced with outlining, you'll be able to make adjustments to the method and individualize it to best suit your needs.

Let's take a look at the overall schedule behind the 30-day method:

Schedule	Stages to Complete	Days Required
Days 1-6	Stage 1: Preliminary Outline	6
Days 7-13	Stage 2: Research	7
Days 14-15	Stage 3: Story Evolution	2
Days 16-24	Stage 4: Formatted Outline	9
Days 25-28	Stage 5: Outline Evaluation	4
Days 29-30	Stage 6: Revise the Outline	2

This is simply an overview of each stage. Keep in mind that each of the six stages identified above has its own day-to-day schedule. These individual schedules are discussed at length at the start of each corresponding chapter.

The first couple of times you use this method, you may find yourself struggling to stay on schedule. Don't worry if you need to allow yourself an extra day or two for some tasks. As you become more familiar with the method, you'll find it easier to stay on schedule. While this method is specifically designed with the promise of completing a full outline before you begin writing the book, we'll talk about outlining and writing in tandem in chapter five, in case you find that you work better that way.

Please remember that the first steps in creating a comprehensive outline are very rough—each step will build on the previous one. The preliminary outline you create in Stage 1 won't contain everything. You'll just be getting your basics down at this point. With each step, you'll be developing more details about every aspect of the book, and your outline will grow to reflect that.

As you're writing the first full draft of your book, you'll also be re-evaluating your outline periodically as your story takes on a life of its own and moves in directions you might not have planned. You won't stop evaluating the strength of your outline until the book is complete.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

In order to use this book, you'll need to have access to the basics: pens, paper, paperclips, a stapler, and even scissors. You also may find it helpful to have expanding and two-pocket folders on hand to help you keep everything organized.

The 30-day method can be completed using pens and paper or on a computer. If you use a computer, it's easiest to start a new document for most of the stages in the preliminary outline phase and to save each document to the same project folder. Also, always remember to print a clean copy of your document at the end of the day. Doing so will keep you better organized and may just inspire a little brainstorming.

CREATIVITY AND OUTLINES

Before I tried writing an outline, I believed I simply couldn't learn to use one. Then I forced

myself to try using an outline—my own version of an outline—for a novel I’d already written numerous drafts of. First I sketched out a couple of chapters, then I started writing the book once more. I completed the outline about midway through writing the first draft of the book. Not long after that, when I first used an outline for a brand new project, I found myself brainstorming productively and constantly. I was able to outline six to eight scenes of the book without writing a word of the actual novel.

Since this meant that the outline was completed well ahead of the novel, was able to revise the *outline* instead of the *novel*. A wondrous thing happened in this process: I could now see the entire novel from start to finish condensed in one place—including all the unworkable parts. All I had to do to strengthen the entire *book* was fix the unworkable elements in the *outline*.

Now when I write a novel, I always start with a complete outline that I can revise as many times as I need to. Writing a book has almost become a simple process. After outlining, most projects require only one full draft and a final edit and polish. I save time, effort, and many, many intense rewrites. I can also write more “final draft” novels a year, which means I have more to show for myself at the end of the year than a half dozen book drafts that need yet another overhaul.

I’ll be the first to state emphatically that there is no wrong way to write a book. I’ve talked to hundreds of authors, published and unpublished, and all of them have their own unique ways of working. There’s no *wrong* way, but some are much less effective than others.

Sadly, too many authors to count believe outlines are a last resort. They see writing as a magical series of epiphanies that somehow takes them from the first page of a novel to the last with little or no premeditation. I don’t discount the magical element—because it *is* there in some degree—but I simply can’t buy into the spiritual intuition way of writing. For one thing, not every brand-new, never-written-much-or-anything-before writer can be expected to have this kind of intuition. Any writer—experienced or not—who finds it difficult to develop plot and character as she writes can benefit from a structured outlining process.

John Berendt says, “Don’t make an outline; make a laundry list. The very idea of an outline suggests rigidity; items on a laundry list can be shifted around. Don’t lock the structure in too early. A piece of writing should evolve as it’s being written.” I hear the same thing from almost every writer I talk to, whether or not he’s published: Writers like outlines about as much as a

homeowner likes termites. The word can actually make some writers cringe and do a full-body shudder. An outline sounds like too much work; it's uninspiring, too confining, absolutely unappealing, necessitates the ability to see far ahead in a novel, *I can't possibly work that way!*

Writers who haven't tried an outlining system have many questions about the process: Is it possible for an outline to be flexible? To take into account my individuality as a writer? Can I continue to be creative using an outline? Can I use an outline for writing in any fiction genre? Can using an outline reduce the number of rewrites I have to do? Can it really take me *less* time to complete a project from start to finish using an outline? Won't setting goals clip my wings rather than allow me to stretch them?

Despite the abhorrence of the word *outline*, many authors are seeking a method to give them direction, a method that *embraces* an individual's way of working, a method that takes away none of the joy of creating. They want something that will streamline the process and make them more productive, so they're not surrounding themselves with half-finished projects and manuscripts in need of major revisions.

If you are one of those authors, let me assure you: An outline *can* be flexible, *can* be so complete it actually qualifies as the first draft of the novel. An outline can make it possible for writers like you to achieve more with less work, not only reducing the number of drafts required for each project, but perhaps even reducing the number to a single draft. This means producing more books and quite likely making more sales to publishers.

Instead of viewing an outline as an inflexible, unchangeable hindrance, imagine it as a snapshot of a novel. A snapshot that captures everything the novel will contain but on a much smaller scale. Just as a photograph can be touched up, this snapshot of a novel can be adjusted and rearranged until it's smooth, strong, and breathtakingly exciting. Revising a comprehensive outline of your novel means revising fifty to a hundred pages instead of four times that. You must admit, my fellow writer, that an outline offers many benefits.

Without robbing you of the joy of your craft, *First Draft in 30 Days* teaches you how to become a systematic, self-disciplined, productive author—no matter your genre or level of experience. While the technique behind the 30-day method takes into account that you're an individual and may have your own methods of getting from Point A to Point B, it nonetheless helps clarify your vision of your story before you begin writing your first (and possibly final) full draft. No more wasted time or endless overhauls and revisions. The clearer your vision of the

story before you start the actual writing, the more fleshed out the story will be once it makes it to paper.

IMPROVING YOUR PRODUCTIVITY

The method contained in this book, combined with the goal-setting suggestions in chapter ten, should cut in half the time it usually takes you to complete a project from outline to final draft. Of course, each writer is different and works at different speeds. A longer book will certainly take longer to write. However, a more complex story won't increase your writing time because you will work out the kinks of the story while outlining.

Before I started using the 30-day method, I could write a full draft of a novel in about two months not counting all the time that I lost when my inspiration failed and I set the book aside and started a new one before eventually returning to the first one. It's also important to note that early in my writing career, I required *twelve drafts* per book to get something halfway decent. Later, by using my earlier drafts but not yet using an outline, I got that number down to four drafts per book. Do the math yourself: When I needed twelve drafts per book, it took me two years or more to complete one novel. When I needed four drafts per book, it took eight months to complete a novel.

Since I've been using the full outline process, the most time it takes to complete an outline of a book—regardless of length—is two to three weeks. And it only takes me one to two months to complete a first and final manuscript draft.

With each book you complete, your skills as a writer are likely to improve. You'll also increase your chances of making a sale if you have more than one book to shop around to publishers and agents.

SEE THE 30-DAY METHOD IN ACTION

In this book, I use a wide variety of examples to demonstrate each step of the 30-day method. Inspired by best-selling novels, these examples come from a variety of genres. They will show you just how versatile the *First Draft in 30 Days* method is. You can use it for every single genre of fiction, no matter how short or long your work is.

However, it's equally important that you see the method used on a single book, the way you'll start out using it yourself. To this end, I want to encourage you to visit my Web site,

where you'll find examples of each step in the process taken from a single book. Included are all the worksheets in Appendix C as I completed them for my novel *Sweet Dreams*. You'll also find the full outline of the book, including an excerpt to show you how the bones took on flesh. Seeing a cohesive picture of how the method works through every stage of my novel will help you visualize how it works as you use it for your novel. Just click on "First Draft" at <http://www.karenwiesner.com>.

GETTING STARTED

The 30-day outlining process described in this book can allow you to harness your muse and put her to work so that you can become a more productive writer. You may feel that by harnessing your muse, you risk restricting your source of inspiration and creativity. Fear not. The 30-day method merely directs your creativity so you can complete your writing projects quickly and easily.

If you're willing to take a leap of faith and commit yourself for the long haul, let's get started!