

# How to Write a Novel: Structure & Outline

edX: UBCx - CW1.1x.

Instructors: Nancy Lee and Annabel Lyon

University of British Columbia Creative Writing Program

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

Outlining is a crucial step in the novel writing process, one that fuels creativity and prepares the writer to stay on track and avoid common pitfalls. Through hands-on weekly exercises with a focus on craft and process, as well as insights from the real-world practices of accomplished authors, this course explores the core elements of fiction writing necessary to build an outline. You will learn the fundamentals of character development, world-building and the basics of storytelling architecture. You'll work intensively on your own creative project and hone your outline through lectures, assignments, videos and discussion with fellow writers.

In the tradition of the UBC MFA program, this course draws on the work habits of established authors to help writers move quickly toward creating a blueprint for a successful draft. Whether you're seeking literary fame or working on a project to share with family and friends, this course offers the tools and skills necessary to plan a novel others will be excited to read.

The course is recommended for professional and aspiring writers, writing groups, participants in NaNoWriMo, teachers and anyone who has ever dreamed of writing a novel.

## WEEK BY WEEK BREAKDOWN

### Every Week

Students will watch instructor videos, interviews with authors and readings. Each week there is at least one assignment, regular group discussion topics and instructor feedback in the form of video responses to selected assignments and live office hours on Google Hangouts.

### Week 1: Introduction / Character, Antagonism & World Building

During the first week we will cover three major topics:

- First, we'll introduce students to the elements of the course, expectations, and what they can hope to accomplish by the end: a complete, detailed novel outline. We'll discuss acceptable behaviour in self-assessment and discussion boards.
- Second, we'll articulate the benefits of outlining and teach students how to approach the process. We argue that outlining is not preparation for writing, but rather it *is* writing. The writer is making decisions about character, plot, structure, theme, and even style in an outline, freeing her up for the creative experience of actually constructing sentences.
- Third, we'll discuss the importance of understanding character, antagonism and world building: these will serve as the foundation of the outline you are going to build.
  - Character: what are the main elements that will keep a reader's interest in a character for the length of an entire novel? Character choices (number of characters, level of detail, etc.) will also have significant consequences for the chosen genre.
  - Antagonism: without conflict a story has no forward momentum. We'll discuss the three levels of antagonism that your protagonist should face.
  - World Building: we'll discuss how create a persuasive "set" for your characters to act on, including not only the visual look of a world but its feel, its social mores, and its emotional tones. Whether the learner is working on science fiction, historical fiction, or contemporary literary fiction, creating a rich, vivid, and credible world will be key to holding the reader's interest.

**Assignment:** learners will discuss examples of protagonists and antagonism from favourite books or movies. Then they will fill out a character self-questionnaire for the protagonist of their proposed novel.

## Week 2: The Internal & External Journeys

A story can be best understood as the delicate balance between two journeys: an internal journey (the journey through emotions) and an external journey (the journey through events). The balance between these two journeys will be determined by the type of the story you'd like to tell.

- First we'll look at the internal journey and its accompanying concepts: belief systems, and making the internal and external stories work in tandem.
- We'll review the external journey and how it is constructed so as to maintain pace, momentum and reader engagement.

- Then we'll look at the varieties of form, the architecture of fiction. In the same way that a building has constituent elements—door, window, rooms, roof—so too do stories (character introduction, rising action, climax, denouement). We'll discuss seven major story forms and their impact on story.
- Finally, we'll look at the synopsis, a written story summary that addresses the major movements of a novel, and look at several examples.

**Assignment:** Learners will brainstorm answers to these questions: Who is your protagonist? What do they yearn for? What are the assorted levels of antagonism? What genre are you writing? What are the rules of your world? Then they will write a rough synopsis of their own novel, a rough starting point for the outline to come.

### Week 3: Story Architecture Part I

This week begins our two week analysis of story architecture:

- We'll begin with hierarchy in story structure. We'll show how a story can be broken down into parts, starting with acts and moving down to scenes and beats, a process which allows us to concentrate on one aspect of the story at a time.
- Second, we'll look at acts, focusing on the first act of a story, the setup which establishes the who, what, where, when, and why of the story.
- Third, we'll look in more detail at the key elements of an outline, discuss several ways of approaching the outline and look at some sample outlines from several authors.
- Finally, we'll break down a scene from Nancy Lee's novel *The Age*, showing how it evolved from a one line description to a complete scene.

**Assignment:** Create an outline of act I of your novel using the scene breakdown method.

### Week 4: Story Architecture Part II

This week will continue our journey into story architecture, focusing on Act II and Act II.

- Act II: complication. This is where conflict increases in intensity and severity and the protagonist is driven to the crisis point. It's also the 'saggy middle', an area where many writers become bogged down in their story. We'll tackle some ways to deal with this.
- Subplots: these are narrative arcs within your novel that work to enhance your main story in a thematic way. We'll discuss several types of subplots and how

- they can be used to complement or even oppose the main plotline of your story.
- Act III: resolution. This act brings your protagonist into the world of the new status quo, where she takes action to create the outcome she wants or needs. We'll look at examples from novels and from film.

**Assignment:** Write a scene analysis and outline of act II of your novel.

### Week 5: Endings and Analysis

Few writers have trouble starting novels, but thousands of them struggle to finish. In this week, we'll troubleshoot common problems, particularly those that tend to appear in Acts II and III. We'll provide the learner with a checklist of questions to ask herself about the structural underpinnings of her 2<sup>nd</sup> act, and provide the tools for structural analysis with a focus on the latter half of the novel.

There will be a particular emphasis this week on the relationship between reading and writing; we aim to show the learner how the tools of analysis he can wield as a reader are identical to those he'll need as a successful outliner and (ultimately) writer.

**Assignment:** Write a scene analysis and outline of act III of your novel.

### Week 6: The Transition to Writing

This week's goal is to produce a workable writing plan and start you on your writing journey.

First, we'll discuss how to take your outline and start writing the novel itself. Then we'll look at our own lives and schedules. We'll pursue several practical goals, such as mapping our own week and finding places where writing can fit in; working with the people around you to carve out time from the demands of work, family, and busy lives; and how to deal with the dread and procrastination that can afflict writers faced with the blank page.

Once the learner has a weekly writing schedule and monthly goals, we'll turn to how she'll actually work from the outline. How much should she expect to accomplish in each writing session? When is it all right to deviate from an outline? What do you do if you get bored because you've already spent so much time in the world of your novel, and you're craving novelty and spontaneity rather than a meticulous plan? Finally, and perhaps most crucially, how do you treat writing like a job? How do you make yourself produce worthwhile material on days when you don't feel inspired?

**Assignment:** Your final task will be to create a detailed writing plan, accounting for all the time you'll need to write the novel as you've envisioned it.