A hand-drawn sketch of a desk with a pen and keyboard. The background is a grid pattern. A pen is visible at the top, and a keyboard is at the bottom. The title is written in a bold, distressed font. The words 'HOW TO WRITE' are in black, and 'A NOVEL' is in gold. The authors' names are in white on a black bar.

# HOW TO WRITE A NOVEL

JOHN MASON AND STAFF OF ACS DISTANCE EDUCATION

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# CREDITS

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# PREFACE

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Many aspiring writers believe they have a novel in them. Whilst some manage to write a novel, many more fail to do so. Aside from the commitment involved, there are many other pitfalls which can derail even those with the greatest intentions.

This book is designed to help would-be novelists to pursue their dreams. We offer ideas to help you explore ways to proceed with writing a novel and hopefully help you to remain motivated. Suggestions are made for plotting the novel, developing characters, revising drafts, editing and improving your novel so that you will feel more confident in what you have written. If you do complete your work we also discuss submitting it for publication and tips for marketing your novel.

# CHAPTER 1 WHAT IS A NOVEL?

*All novels are stories, but not all stories are novels.*

## THE ORIGINS OF STORYTELLING

Humans have been telling stories since the dawn of time but the advent of the novel (as we know it) *came much later in our development and is quite new when compared to the history of story-telling.*

*Before stories were written down people just talked to each other about what had happened around them. They were relating or retelling descriptions of events. Since an event doesn't have to have a resolution this type of 'story-telling' is classed as an anecdote.*



There were also people that were 'storytellers'. Their role in life was to tell stories and this dates back to the time when people still dwelt in caves. The stories people told may have been about actual events, but they also included mythology and religion or ways to make sense of the complexities of nature and the world around them.

Not all storytelling was oral though, some stories were told through pictures and drawings. For example, Egyptian hieroglyphics (the earliest Egyptian mythology was recorded before 4000BCE), drawings on clay tablets, or the cave paintings of primitive peoples. Stories were also told through dance, music or singing. Later, in countries such as England (during the 18th century) news was often relayed by town criers; town criers made public pronouncements in the streets.

Written collected histories of people and the world around them, although short, were some of the first writings. Then there were plays and dramatic arts and poetry. For a long time, poetry was the longest form of story. One of first was Homer's Greek epics (The Iliad and The Odyssey written 800-700 BCE). There was also *Beowulf*, a 3000 line poem of the battle between the hero Beowulf and his nemesis, the monster known as Grendel, which dates somewhere between the 8th and the 11th centuries and is written in a language that's identifiable as being related to English. There are many other early examples of early poetic writings.

The (longer) prosaic short stories or novellas appeared in what we now consider Italy, around the 14th century. All this writing came before what is regarded as the modern novel.

Novels are the ‘newest’ form of storytelling but a lot of the techniques we use in writing them have their roots in earlier stories in the sense that every kind of story influences the next. Narrative arc for example, a way of mapping the story in a novel, was originally based on plays.

What you learn here about novels can be applied to any kind of story. What you learn from watching a movie, reading a poem, reading other novels and listening to people telling stories, can all be applied to writing novels. Remember that as you read through this book.

### ***Presentation formats of novels:***

*Printed paper*

*Electronic/kindle, etc.*

*eBooks*

*CD audio*

*Braille*

## **PRESENTATION OF NOVELS TODAY**

*In today’s world what we mean by a novel has changed* in that it can be presented in different ways. In the past, a novel was a book printed on paper and bound within a cover. Nowadays a novel may still be printed, but it may

also be electronic – some novels are only available in electronic format e.g. to be read on a ‘Kindle’ or other electronic book reader, or presented as eBooks and read on computers, tablets and other electronic devices.

## **WHAT CONSTITUTES A NOVEL?**

Most novels are fiction. How they are fiction can vary. Some are very experimental and include images which are essential to the story, like Brian Selznick’s children’s novel, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*. Some newer novels are hypertext works, which link back and forth within themselves in digital formats, to create a new kind of story. Some novels, however, fit into what’s now called ‘creative non-fiction’ – novels which create a story around facts and research. It’s hard to define what makes a non-fiction book a creative non-fiction novel, though, and it’s something critics, reviewers, and literary theorists are still arguing over. There is, however, one type of creative non-fiction novel that most people do agree should be classed as a novel, and this is novels which fall within the genre of ‘true crime’.

Finally, there are novels which are fictionalised accounts. These are usually some kind of biography or memoir based on historical events where the author researches the period and the person, and writes a story about how things may have happened. These novels can give the reader insight into a particular piece of history, but it’s important to remember that they are not actually history. Examples of

these include Philippa Gregory's *Boleyn* series and Hillary Mantel's Booker Prize winning novel *Bring Up The Bodies* (part of the Thomas Cromwell trilogy). Both of these are about certain characters in Henry the Eighth's England. Then there's Latino author Mario Vargas Llosa's novel, *The Dream of the Celt*, which is a fictionalised biography of one of the people involved in the Irish Uprising of the early 20th century.

## Novels - Word Length

Word length in a novel depends on the genre. In children's novels for readers aged 7 – 12, novels can be as short as 10,000 words or as long as 30,000. In science fiction and fantasy works they sometimes go as high as 45,000 words.

Young adult novels, or novels for readers 13 and up, are around 45,000 words for the low end of the age range, and 60-65,000 words for the higher end of the age range. In the case of science fiction and fantasy novels, that 65,000 can get as high as 80,000 words, and in extreme cases, even up to 100,000 words.

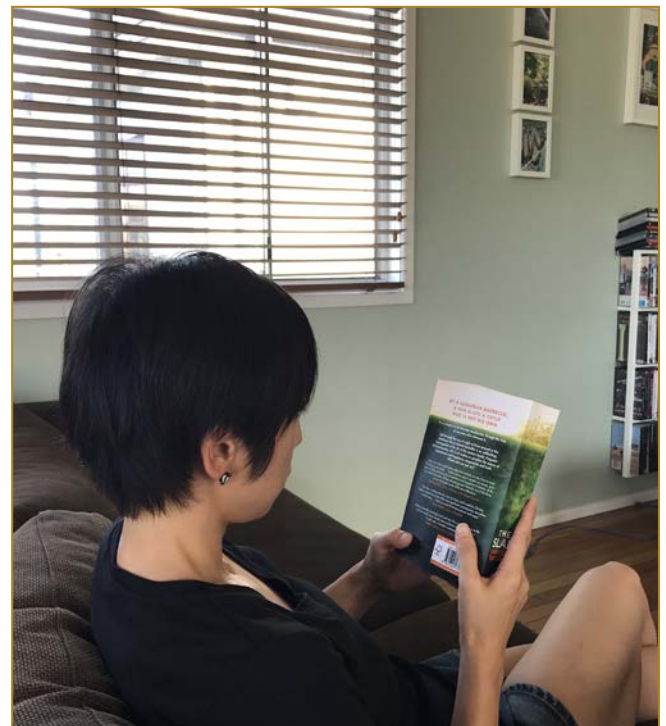
Novels for adults are usually around 80,000 words, though again, some categories go higher. Romance, historical fiction, science fiction, and fantasy novels can run as high as 100,000 to 120,000 words each. Some fantasy trilogies – three books in the same series – can total close to 500,000 words.

If that sounds daunting, don't panic. It's better to have a shorter draft you can add to than a longer one you have to keep cutting down.

## Novellas – Word Length

Some people call novellas 'short novels'. These are usually books for adults of anywhere from 18,000 to 35,000 words. Many of what we refer to as novels today, are actually novellas. American author John Steinbeck's book, *Of Mice and Men*, clocks in at just below 30,000 words. Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is around 27,000 words, while Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is only about 20,000 words.

Many stories benefit from being shorter. Outside of word length, the major difference between novellas and novels is that novellas have fewer events and, often, fewer characters. Remember: word count isn't a measure of how good a book is. It's the story that matters.



## GENRE OF NOVELS

*Novels are usually broken into genres, or general areas of interest. Most genres also have subgenres. Mystery,*



for instance, is a genre, but it can be broken into the subgenres of crime, detective, cosy, and more. This can be a little confusing to begin with but as you develop your story, you'll spend time reading within your genre and get comfortable with all its subgenres.

### ***The major genres as defined by publishers and reviewers:***

*Mystery*

*Romance*

*Crime (sometimes a subgenre of mystery)*

*Science fiction*

*Dystopia (sometimes a subgenre of science fiction)*

*Paranormal Romance (sometimes a subgenre of fantasy or romance)*

*Fantasy*

*Historical/Period*

*Young Adult*

*Children's*

*Suspense*

*Gothic fiction*

*Thriller*

*Horror*

*Contemporary/Realistic*

*Magic Realism*

*Graphic novels*

*Verse novels*

*Post-modernist*

## **A Note on Literary Fiction**

*Literary fiction is not usually considered a 'genre' but a style or category of writing – most of the above genres fall into 'commercial fiction' as opposed to 'literary fiction'. This is explained in more detailed later this lesson.*

If you've never heard of some of these genres, that's not surprising. This list is constantly in flux, with new things being added and old things being taken away. There was a time when 'Westerns' (as in cowboy stories) were considered a major genre. This is rarer now. Some subgenres, like 'paranormal romance', become so big and popular that they get added to the list and are considered genres in their own right.

## **Cross-genre**

Many novels do not fit neatly into one genre. These are usually referred to as cross-genre works, for example a novel may be both science fiction and love story. Publishers will file cross-genre books under up to three genres, but rarely more, and one specific genre is usually picked for marketing purposes. H. G. Well's works, *The War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine* fit into today's marketplace as both science fiction and dystopia, while Kurt Vonnegut's novels could be marketed as literary, post-modernist, or even the speciality subgenre 'absurdist'.

The best way to get a handle on genres is to read. This will help you get an idea of the conventions, or 'rules' of your genre. Of course, as an author, it's more important that you write your story first. If thinking about genres, or trying to figure out which is the best genre

for you is cutting into your writing time, set aside your thoughts on genre and get on with your writing. The genre will become clearer later.

## Specialty genres

As discussed there are many genres in novels and novellas – some fit fairly neatly into the list above, and others (sometimes known as specialty genres) fall slightly outside of the common genres. Some examples include:

**Absurdist:** an offshoot of modernist literature, absurdist fiction started in the late 19th century. Authors include: Samuel Becket, Albert Camus, Joseph Heller and many others. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams is an excellent example.

**Allegory:** uses stories and characters in a symbolic way to convey messages to the reader usually of a moral, political, religious or historical nature. Examples include: *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis and *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding.

**Bildungsroman:** a story detailing the formative years of a character through to adulthood i.e. their emotional and moral growth.

**Humour:** there are a lot of sub-genres in comedic writing including:

- **Black humour/satire:** a story which makes light of serious issues and misfortunes. Martin Amos, Roald Dahl, Joseph Heller, Phillip Roth, and Kurt Vonnegut are all writers of black humour.

- **Comedy-drama:** combining humorous events into serious situations or an otherwise serious novel. For example: *The Glass Castle* by Jeanette Walls.

- **Farce:** usually improbable and humorous events, situations and antics in a fast-paced story. Sometimes mocking of the upper classes. For example: the novels of PD Wodehouse and Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

**Epic novels:** originally a long narrative poem of heroism and heroic deeds. For example: Homer's *Iliad*. The genre now includes prose using the same elements. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is an example.

**Epistolary fiction:** tales told through the exchange of letters between characters.

**Fictional autobiography or fictional biography:** the first example being a story written in the first person that professes to be an account of someone's life. Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is a good example. Fictional biography is a fictionalised account of a person (it may be a real person or a fictional person) that sets out to resemble a factual story. For example: *Dr Samuel Johnson* (as Sherlock Holmes) as chronicled by Lillian de la Torre; Philip José Farmer's *Tarzan Alive* is an example of the biography of a fictional character.

**Melodrama:** stories that are written to appeal to human emotions i.e. the prose is highly emotional and usually deals with romantic and sensational subjects. The works of Charles Dickens and Emily Bronte are good examples of melodramatic writing.

**Pastiche:** a story that imitates the work of one or more established authors or develops upon such work. A good example is Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* which follows the further life of the Dickensian character from *Great Expectations*. *Scarlett* by Alexandra Ripley is a pastiche of *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell (1991).

**Picaresque:** usually satiric prose fiction often with a rogue or anti-hero as the protagonist. Examples include: *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes and *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexander Dumas.

**Parody:** an exaggerated (mocking) imitation of the genre or style of a particular piece of writing or writer. Examples include: *Cold Comfort Farm* by Stella Gibbons which is a mocking imitation of books such as Jane Eyre's *Wuthering Heights*, and *50 Sheds of Grey* (written under the pseudonym Colin Trevor Grey) a parody on *50 Shades of Grey* by EL James.

**Travelogue:** prose that centres round a journey through a country or countries. For example: *Travels with Charlie* by John Steinbeck and Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*.



## AUDIENCE AND THE NOVEL

Books need a target audience in order to sell; a 'target audience' is the audience that is best suited to the book. A target audience may be adults, teens or children but because readers differ in their reading preferences it will also be a 'type' of adult, teen or child. There is absolutely no point in trying to target your book to the wrong audience.

## The High Concept Novel

'High concept' is a term which originated in the film industry as a method of 'pitching' an idea for a film to potential producers. However, the publishing industry has also now adopted this term and applied it to certain types of novels, and the approach that is used to describe them. The high concept pitch is also used to pitch novels to potential publishers before they are even written – the pitch