1. How to get started? Try to look at these websites:

<http://www.betternovelproject.com/blog/nanowrimo-outline/> story outline cheat sheet



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http://www.writersdigest.com/wp-content/uploads/quick-subscribe-shadow.png

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**How to Prepare for NaNoWriMo:   
To Outline or Not To Outline**

By: [**Brian A. Klems**](http://www.writersdigest.com/author/brian-a-klems) | October 27, 2014

[7](http://www.writersdigest.com/online-editor/how-to-prepare-for-nanowrimo-to-outline-or-not-to-outline)Share

November is almost here, which means two things: 1) You’re going to be seeing [a lot of mustaches](http://thelifeofdad.blogspot.com/2010/11/growing-mustache-week-1-first-trimester.html) and 2) it’s time to start preparing for [National Novel Writing Month](http://nanowrimo.org/) (NaNoWriMo).

Over the coming weeks, with the help of my friend and author Kevin Kaiser, I’m going to offer some tips on how to prepare for and accomplish the NaNoWriMo goal of writing 50,000 words in 30 days. Let’s get this started with this guest post from Kevin on outlining your story before the November 1 start date.

**Should You Outline Ahead of Time?**

It’s an age-old debate: Should writers meticulously outline a story before beginning or should they simply sit down at the keyboard and start typing, blindly trusting that the characters will reveal what should happen next?

Like most things in life, I believe it’s both/and, not either/or. Even the most fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants writer has a general idea of where things are going, if only in her head. But what is a NaNoWriMo participant supposed to do? After all, thirty days goes by quickly.

**1. Realize that NaNoWriMo is, above all, about finishing.**

About 250,000 people began NaNoWriMo last year, according to the Office of Letters and Light, the non-profit behind the writing program. Only about 33,000 people actually finished the challenge and put 50,000 words to paper—that’s just 14 out of 100 people!

NaNoWriMo is about finishing, and not creating the next great American novel. It’s about proving to yourself that you can lay down at least 1,600 words per day for a whole month even if they’re a spectacular mess.

I wonder how many of the 86% that didn’t finish spent so much time overthinking their story that they simply didn’t write it. In the case of NaNo, do not allow perfectionism or fear creep in and paralyze you.

**2. Identify the story arc.**

Knowing what your story is about is very important, and you should have an idea where it’s heading. That simple knowledge will solve many of your problems when you feel the story beginning to lock up.

Once you have a sense for what your story is about, break it up into three “acts” and write a few sentences about what happens in each one. For example:

*In Act 1, the protagonist sees herself on a missing person’s database and realizes her life is all a lie. She escapes her captor, who happens to be her husband, but he takes their two-year old daughter hostage.*

*In Act 2, the protagonist is the on the run because we learn her husband famed her for a murder. Now the FBI is pursuing her. At the end, she hunts her husband down.*

*In Act 3, she saves her daughter and gets her life back. The husband dies.*

**3. Once you have the arc, break the story into chapter “sketches”.**

Again, keep it simple. Write two or three sentences for each chapter that give you a general direction when you sit down to write. Be flexible. The story will present itself in detail as you go, but this approach will give your imagination a springboard.

For this story, we’ll shoot for an overall word count of 50,000 words that’s broken into 30 chapters, one for each day of NaNoWriMo. That’s 1,667 words per day, which is roughly five and a half pages. Here’s what it might look like:

*Chapter 1: Liz, the protagonist, is online one day and discovers her profile on a national missing persons website. She shows it to her husband, who begins acting manic.*

*Chapter 2: Liz realizes that it must be true. She puts the pieces together and decides she should go to the police. When she tries, her husband knocks her out.*

*Chapter 3: Liz awakes in a box. A coffin? She’s been buried alive and tries to get out.*

Thinking through the book in broad terms like this will help you envision it more fully as you go forward.

**4. Act. Start writing and don’t look back.**

Once you have a skeleton framework, start. Act. Write. Don’t get preparation paralysis. The only way to write a novel is one word at a time. The only way to write each of those words, however unsatisfactory they might be, is to write them. Books don’t write themselves.

From the beginning, realize that it’s okay to stray from your sketched-out story. In fact, you should as you dive into it. Stories have a way of evolving as they unfold in the process, buy you must be in motion, moving the story forward, in order for it to present itself.

Day-by-Day NaNoWriMo Outline: Your 30-Day Cheatsheet <http://www.betternovelproject.com/blog/nanowrimo-outline/>

Getting Ready for NaNoWriMo

<http://storyist.com/support/howto/get-ready-for-nanowrimo/>



*by Steve Shepard, Storyist developer, and avid NaNoWriMo participant.*

“What are you writing this year?”

It’s the question on everyone’s lips at the regional NaNoWriMo kickoff parties. The answer, even among seasoned NaNoWriMo veterans, is often “I don’t know.” If you don’t know either, relax—you’re in good company.

If you’re looking for ideas, you’ll find plenty of resources to get you going. The [NaNoWriMo forums](http://nanowrimo.org/forums), and Chris Baty’s book [*No Plot? No Problem!*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0811845052/ref=nosim/storysoftw-20) are two of the best.

As this is my tenth year participating in NaNoWriMo, I thought I’d add to the mix with a quick how-to on the techniques that have worked for me.

Play “What If?”

So what should you write?

Conventional wisdom says that you should write what you know. If you’re a teacher, write about a teacher facing one of the many struggles teachers face. If you’re an accountant, write about an accountant facing accountant stuff.

Or not.

I disagree with this “conventional” wisdom. For many writers, part of the joy of writing is in learning something new, and in living in a world of your making. The trick is finding a story idea that captures your imagination.

One of the more effective ways to do this is to play a game of “What If?” Look around you and ask what would happen if something you cared deeply about changed in a significant way. For example:

* “What if I finally found my true love only to discover that she was in love with someone else?”
* “What if someone kidnapped my daughter?”
* “What if my high-school-age self ran for class president and didn’t get a single vote?”

If you are uncomfortable putting yourself at the center of your story, look around you. Family, friends, and co-workers are great sources for “What Ifs.”

* “What if my mom discovered my that dad was cheating on her?”
* “What if my kid brother finally decided to retaliate against that bully Jimmy Porter?”
* “What if my boss were a zombie?”

Be forewarned, though; friends and family can be very prickly if you put them in your novel. And while you could [use this to your advantage](http://www.zazzle.com/careful_you_may_end_up_in_my_novel_tshirt-235403271220905967), you’re probably better off disguising their situations so they won’t know it’s them.

If those “what ifs” don’t work for you, you can always turn to the Web. Current news stories make great starting points.

* “What if Canada decided to build a wall too?”
* “What if Donald Trump developed amnesia?”
* “What if James Comey conspired with Obama to cover up the fact that Clinton is really a Russian spy?”

Take fifteen minutes or so and write down as many “What Ifs” as you can. Try to fill a couple of pages.

Tip: Play with a friend. This exercise can be uproariously funny if you give it half a chance.

Tip 2: Be as specific as possible. Use “my boss” instead of “management,” and “James Comey” instead of “the FBI.” Even a vast conspiracy needs a point person through whom the reader can experience the evil. You probably should use a fictional name, however.

Then, sift through the list and find the “What If” that grabs you. If you can’t pick one, take some time to cull the top three, and flip a three-sided coin to identify the winner.

Identify the Story Line

Look at your “What If” question. What is the story is about?

The answer isn’t always obvious. For example, consider the question, “What if I finally found my true love only to discover that she was in love with someone else?”

The story might be about your quest to win her heart, whatever the cost. However, the story could just as easily be about her fight to fend off the stalker that threatens to come between her and her true love.

If the question is “What if Donald Trump developed amnesia?”, the story might be a redemption tale where Trump gradually discovers who he really is and decides to make a fresh start, or it might be a revenge story about the candidate getting what’s coming to him. Or it might be a thriller about the newly elected President suddenly waking up in the White House with his finger on the button.

The character that drives this story line is your protagonist. The character that opposes your protagonist is the antagonist.

Once you know who your protagonist and antagonist are and have a general idea of the story line, take a stack of index cards (or use Storyist, which [provides virtual index card support](http://storyist.com/mac/#story-development-tools)), and jot down all the things you can think of that would keep your protagonist from getting what they want.

When I say everything, I mean everything. Go for quantity over quality. Use one card for each idea. And remember this: the more difficult, the more larger-than-life the conflict, the more compelling the story.

Flesh Out Your Main Characters

Now, create two new pages of notes, one for your protagonist and one for your antagonist. For each character, ask yourself:

* Why is this character interesting to me?
* If faced with the conflict in my story, how would she react?
* What were the major events in her childhood?
* What does she love more than anything else in the world?
* What is she afraid of?
* Is there anything distinctive about her speech, appearance, or behavior that sets her apart?

Write down your answers in your character pages.

Then, ask some of your own. There are a million other questions you could ask. Brainstorm. Search the web. If you’re stuck, try answering the [Proust Questionnaire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proust_Questionnaire) for your character. Don’t worry if the character doesn’t “click” right now. Get some ideas on paper.

Many writers like to assemble a collage of photos of to use for inspiration as they write. If this appeals to you, take a few minutes to surf the Web for images that evoke your character. Google Images is a good place to start.

Your goal at this point is to understand what makes your characters tick. Keep in mind that many of the character details will change, sometimes drastically, as you write—that’s part of the magic. Taking some time now to understand the core of the character will help you keep your story on track later.

Create a Supporting Cast

Now that you have a clearer picture of who your protagonist and antagonist are, it’s time to populate your story world with a cast of interesting characters. Set aside a few hours, find a public place, pack your laptop or pad of paper, and sit and watch.

Coffee shops work well since you can sit for hours and use your laptop without attracting attention. But keep in mind that the clientele at the shop are likely to be a lot like you, so you won’t see as much diversity as you would if you ventured off your beaten path.

Try to find a place that matches your setting. If you’re writing a legal thriller, park yourself outside a law office. Writing a medical drama? Visit a hospital.

Soak it all in. If you do, you’ll have a wealth of character sketches to draw on as you’re writing.

Observe the Group as a Whole

The supporting characters in your story will change significantly from draft to draft.

The quirky nurse in draft one may need to become the perky intern in draft two to tie up a romantic subplot. The co-worker who inadvertently sets the story in motion may need to become a mail room manager to accommodate a change in setting. The important thing at this point is to get a sense of the group, so create a new page of notes to record your general sense of the crowd.

Things to observe:

* **Dress.** Does the group adhere to a dress code? Describe it. What are they wearing and how does it set them apart? Can you identify the leaders by how they dress?
* **Behavior.** How do they treat each other? With respect? Disdain? Is there a sense of camaraderie among them, or is it “every man for himself?”
* **Speech.** Are they well-spoken or crude? Record any words, phrases, or acronyms you don’t understand.

A little secret: What you observe in these outings isn’t actually that important. What is important is that you’re training yourself to observe the world as a writer does. You’ll find yourself doing that a lot in the coming month.

Focus on the Individuals Who Interest You

After you have a good sense of the group, pick a few individuals who interest you and dig deeper. What attracted your attention? Jot down the physical actions and details as quickly as you can.

Then, try to imagine what they are thinking. What problems do they face? What do they want badly? Why are they having trouble getting it?

Find Your Key Scenes

Now that you have a tentative cast of characters, take out that stack of index cards, and spread them out in front of you. These are the candidates for scenes in your novel.

Arrange them in a sequence that makes sense to you. You can set some of the wackier cards aside, but don’t throw them away—these cards often contain the seeds for your most powerful scenes.

Don’t hurry through this phase. Take time to ponder. Annotate the cards with new ideas. Create new cards entirely. You’re creating your story’s reality. Enjoy this god-like ability.

When you’re happy with the order, pick the five cards with the highest conflict. These are candidates for your key scenes.

What are key scenes? These are the dramatic high points that sling the story onward toward its inevitable conclusion. A lot of writing books describe the key scenes roughly as follows:

1. **The Inciting Incident.** This scene dramatizes the call to action, the event that propels your protagonist into the story.
2. **End of Act I.** A second high-conflict scene usually occurs at the end of Act 1, or about a quarter of the way through the story. This is the “we’re not in Kansas anymore” moment where your protagonist realizes the totality of the challenge she faces and discovers that there is no going back.
3. **Midpoint.** A third high-conflict scene falls somewhere near the middle of the story. This is the point where things look bleakest for your protagonist. It may appear that there is no way out, that the antagonist is just too powerful, that it is probably wisest to run rather than stand and fight.
4. **End of Act II.** A fourth high-conflict point usually occurs at the end of Act II, about three-quarters of the way through the story. Your protagonist has decided to fight (really, how could she do anything else?), and this is a major test. The stakes are high (but not yet the highest), and propel the story on to its inevitable conclusion.
5. **Climax.** The last high-conflict scene comes near the end of the book. This is the battle of all battles, the decisive moment that determines whether your protagonist gets what she wants badly, or not.

Sounds simple, right?

Usually, it isn’t that simple. The high-conflict scenes you picked from your stack will rarely match the key scenes listed above. So why didn’t I tell you about the “conventional” key scenes first? Because I don’t think you should spend too much time pouring your story into someone else’s mold. Pacing is important in storytelling, though, and you should think about how you’re going to keep the story moving. Use the above descriptions if they help.

So what now? Are you happy with your key scenes? If not, don’t be afraid to reshuffle the cards or start over. The goal here is gradual understanding. If you know more about your story after this first pass than you did before you started, you’ve made progress. Put the cards away for a day and come back to them with a fresh pair of eyes if you need to.

Then:

1. Adjust your character notes, especially the notes on the supporting cast, to reflect the scenes.
2. Adjust your scenes to reflect the cast of characters.
3. Repeat as necessary until the story settles, but don’t agonize over this. There will be LOTS of loose ends at this point, and you won’t be able to see the entire novel in your mind’s eye.

Here are some common problems you might run across in the process.

1. **Your high-conflict scenes are all bunched together in the middle of your story.**

First, ask yourself if your story is begging to be told over a shorter period of time. Shortening the timeline can heighten the tension (usually a good thing) and make it easier to keep the story moving. If this opportunity presents itself, jump at it. Set the other scenes aside for prequels and sequels.

If not, see if you can spread out the high-conflict scenes and rework the others to fill in around them. Keep in mind that the best stories have a natural rhythm, though, so resist the pressure to shoehorn scenes into places they don’t belong.

1. **Your scenes don’t grab you the way they did.**

There are a couple of reasons for this. One is that, knowing more about your characters than you did when you started, the scene no longer “fits” the character. Change one or the other. Modifying your story at this point is trivial. It won’t always be so.

1. **You don’t have enough scenes.**

Don’t worry about it. Do your best and move on. As you’re writing, you’ll come up with scenes you like better anyway. At this point, you’re just trying to identify the high points, the signposts that point the way.

Write the Jacket Blurb

Now that you have the cast and story line fleshed out, write the blurb that you’d like to see on the back of your book jacket. Why? Three reasons.

1. It’ll help you understand your story better.
2. You’ll have an answer to give if your friends, relatives, or co-workers ask you what your story is about (and they will ask; they’ll be snooping around to see if they’re in it).
3. You’ll have something to place by your monitor to give you fuel as you write.

How do you write a jacket blurb? That is up to you. Look to the back jacket of your favorite novels for examples. In general, try to accomplish these things:

1. Tell the story in a paragraph or two.
2. Identify the protagonist that the reader will be rooting for.
3. Give a flavor of the locale and a sense of why the story is compelling.

Need a place to start? Try this:

“When <an inciting incident rocks the protagonist’s world>, <protagonist> must <overcome a series of obstacles> to <achieve the story goal>.”

Frank Daniel, a noted screenwriter and teacher, summarized the story goal as follows: “Somebody wants something badly and is having trouble getting it.”

When reading your blurb, do you get a sense of who wants what badly, and why they’re having trouble getting it?

Write a Two-Page Outline

OK, now the controversial part: My next step is to write a two-page outline.

“Outlining!?” you say. “That sounds down right un-NaNoWriMoish. I’ll bet Chris Baty is rolling over in his grave.”

To that I say: 1) Chris is very much alive, and 2) I agree. But bear with me here. While NaNoWriMo is a “fun, seat-of-your-pants approach to novel writing,” it isn’t anarchy. Not usually, anyway.

I think of it as an expedition: Four peaks in four weeks.

1. You leave base camp and climb the first peak—Act I of your story.
2. At top of the first peak, look around, find your next peak—the middle of Act II—and hike down into the next valley. After a long, adventure-filled trek, you summit the second peak.
3. You again scout the next peak—this time the end of Act II—and descend into the next valley. After a strenuous climb, you reach the third peak…
4. …and you do the same thing: Scout the peak and head back into the valley to reach the climax of your book, the fourth peak.

The map that helps you get from peak to valley to peak is your two-page outline.

Why two pages? It is long enough to convey the gist of the story, but short enough to leave plenty of room for discovery along the way.

My two-pagers usually include a sketch of the major characters and their plot threads and some specific details about what happens at the turning points in the story.

If you’ve already written your character bios, identified your key scenes, and written your jacket blurb, you’re most of the way there. Just put it in prose.

Here are some tips:

* **Tell the story.** The purpose of the outline is to give you the experience of the story in abbreviated form. Who are the main characters? What do they desperately need? How do they go about getting it? You can include bits of theme if you want, but don’t state it explicitly; make it implicit in the thoughts and actions of your characters.
* **Use present tense.** Present tense helps give a sense of immediacy to the outline.
* **Use dialog sparingly.** You’re painting in broad strokes here, so keep it at a high-level. An exception to the “rule”: One or two sentences of dialog can be very effective in dramatizing a turning point in the story.

Pack for Your Expedition

Congratulations! Now you’re ready to write. Well, almost.

November is a busy month and it goes by quickly. Here are some things you can do to make sure it goes smoothly:

* **Create a writing calendar.** To reach 50,000 words by December 1, you’ll need to write an average of 1667 words a day. If you’re not able to write every day, come up with a plan to stay ahead and put it on your calendar.
* **Set up your writing environment.** If you’re writing at home, make sure you’ve got the supplies you’ll need close at hand (don’t forget the caffeine!). Clean up. And if you’re going to be using a new writing program, make sure you put it through its paces before November 1st.
* **Create a dust jacket for your novel and post it in your work area.** Better yet, go to a used bookstore and pick up the two books that would be on either side of yours on the shelf and stick a mockup of your book, cover and all, in the middle. This will provide emotional fuel for the lean times. You can get as fancy as you want. If you’re not a Photoshop pro, you can use a tool like [Canva](https://www.canva.com/) to create a jacket.
* **Let your gang know what you’ll be up to in November.** You’ll probably want to let the people close to you know that you’ll be less available to them. Get their buy-in, and give them permission to needle you if you’re not writing when you should be.
* **Find some writing buddies.** Ideally, these are writers in your community whom you’ll see at write-ins, and with whom you can toss around ideas with in person. But this is the twenty-first century, and the world is a much smaller place thanks to the Web. Your writing buddies may be across the globe from you, but if you can keep in touch, cheer each other on, and celebrate together when someone crosses the magic 50k mark, you’re all set. And if you need a writing buddy, feel free to add me. My username on the nanowrimo.org site is, you guessed it … [storyist](http://nanowrimo.org/participants/storyist).

So to recap:

1. Play “What If?”
2. Identify the story line.
3. Flesh out your main characters.
4. Create a supporting cast.
5. Find your key scenes.
6. Write the jacket blurb.
7. Write a two-page outline.
8. Pack for your expedition.

That’s about it. If you follow these steps, you’ll be in excellent shape for November. The most important thing is that you spend some time understanding your story in October so you can use the precious days in November to write.

50k or bust!

-Steve

[](http://allindiewriters.com/)

<http://allindiewriters.com/preparing-for-nanowrimo/>

The Write Life

<http://thewritelife.com/prepare-nanowrimo-4-week-success-plan/>

Helping writers create, connect and earn

* How to Prepare for NaNoWriMo: Your 4-Week Success Plan

September 23, 2016 By [Janice Hardy](http://thewritelife.com/author/janice-hardy/) [71 Comments](http://thewritelife.com/prepare-nanowrimo-4-week-success-plan/#comments)



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If you’re participating in National Novel Writing Month ([NaNoWriMo](http://thewritelife.com/5-tips-for-preparing-to-write-your-novel/" \t "_blank)) this November , you’re likely gearing up to plan your novel in October. Writing 50,000 words in 30 days takes work, and starting the month prepared makes it easier to hit your goal — or even surpass it.

Since all stories are about an interesting character solving an interesting problem in an interesting way, your first step is to figure out your main character(s), the story problem, and the main goal.

**In a few sentences, describe what this novel will be about.** This summary will be your guide for October, and help keep you on track all through November.

Week 1 (October 1 to 7): Focus on the novel’s setup

Beginnings introduce the characters, story problem, and [story world or setting](http://thewritelife.com/worldbuilding/) to readers, and they set the stage for the rest of the novel.

**A strong start will provide you with solid scene goals, giving you something to write about every day.**

Things to determine:

How the protagonist is introduced

What traits do you want readers to know right away? How might you show those traits in action? What likable qualities does your protagonist have? How can you show those qualities in your opening scene or first chapter?

The problem the opening scene deals with

An opening with an interesting problem to solve gives the story drive and the characters reasons to act. What problem might your protagonist face when the novel opens?

Remember, the goal of an opening is to a.) hook readers and b.) lead the plot to the core conflict of the novel.

The inciting event

If this event did not happen, there would be no novel. It either drives your opening, or is the bridge between your opening scene and the beginning of the middle (act two).

Week 2 (October 8 to 14): Focus on how problems get solved in the middle

This middle is where the bulk of the novel unfolds as your characters work to resolve their problems and fail *a lot*. The number of attempts and failures will vary by the type of story, as thrillers have different expectations than romances.

Things to consider:

How the setup transitions to the middle

Everything in your beginning will lead to the middle, where the protagonist will make that all-important choice to accept responsibility for resolving the plot, and move into act two. T**he opening scene leads to the inciting event, which leads to this decision.**

The major problem or event revealed in the middle

Adding a big shake up, problem, or reveal at the novel’s center can prevent the all-too-common boggy middle. The mid-point event creates the goal and problem the second half of the middle will have to resolve, and set up what will happen in the ending.

How the middle transitions to the ending

The protagonist has failed, feels utterly lost and hopeless, and things are at their worst. What the protagonist does here will launch the ending and lead to the climax of the novel.

Week 3 (October 15 to 21): Focus on how the novel ends

The ending is how the novel’s core conflict problem is resolved. It starts with the protagonist at her lowest point and drives her to the ultimate showdown with the antagonist.

Things to determine:

How the protagonist plans to defeat the antagonist

Although the plan may (and often does) fail, this is the goal that launches the ending and propels the protagonist to the climax. What are some of the steps that will take the protagonist from hopeless to victorious (or hopeless to defeated, if that’s how it ends)?

How the novel ends

You might not know the details at this stage, but it helps to have at least a general idea of how the core conflict of the novel is resolved.

How the protagonist is changed by the experience

In most novels, the protagonist grows and becomes a better person by the end of the novel. What changes for your protagonist? How is she better off? How is she *worse* off? What did she learn?

Week 4 (October 22 to 28): Focus on major turning points of the story

Flesh out whatever you need to write your novel.

If your story is character-driven, you might plan the character arc and focus more on the internal journey of your protagonist and discover the plot as you write.

If you’re a plot-driven writer, you might prefer to map out the major plot points and figure out who your characters are by how they solve those plot problems.

Whatever your process, look at the key turning points and elements you need to keep your story moving forward. I suggest aiming for three major points per act (beginning, middle and ending), but develop as many as you like to keep your plot on target.

Final Days (October 29 to 31): Write a query pitch

It might sound crazy, but I recommend writing a rough query pitch to **make sure you have enough figured out to write your novel**.

The [query letter format](http://thewritelife.com/one-page-book-proposal/) is a fantastic way to verify the necessary elements of your plot and characters, and find holes before you fall into them.

**NaNoWriMo is a lot of fun, and a good way to whip out a fast first draft.** Plan accordingly, and you’ll be able to hit or exceed your daily word-count goals and reach your 50K.

**Are you doing NaNo this year? How much to you prep for it?**