

GRAVELINE GUIDE: ORGANIZE YOUR MATERIAL

By E. F. Watkins

One of the most challenging aspects of writing a novel is organizing the background material.

A typical full-length book includes numerous characters, frequent changes of location and a complex plot with many twists and turns. In addition, you'll want insightful reflections, clever bits of dialogue and striking descriptions to add richness to your story.

Some of your best ideas may occur when you're far from your computer--driving to work, showering or drifting off to sleep--and you'll probably jot them on whatever scraps of paper come in handy. While waiting for a doctor's appointment, you may tear out (or photocopy, if you're nice) a magazine article pertinent to your latest plot. Since creative people aren't known as models of organization, anyway, you may soon find your desk at home littered with notes from various sources.

How can you keep track of all these elements so you can find them when you need them?

Take Up the Accordion

Different methods work for different people. Jack Passarella, author of *WITHER* and *WITHER'S RAIN*, creates an accordion folder for each book, into which he puts any relevant

brochures and newspaper or magazine articles. He also uses his computer to create a Notes file for each novel. This includes:

- * A list of characters--names, birthdays, physical traits, backgrounds and maybe sample dialogue. There may also be a list of turning points in their lives, or their personal story arcs within the novel.

- * An evolving outline of the book, with turning points in the plot and assorted upcoming scenes.

- * Settings, with names of places, businesses and streets.

- * A table or chart of action scenes.

- * If the novel has fantasy elements, a "rules" system for how things work or are invoked.

Get Carded

P.D. Cacek prefers to outline by putting various scenes on file cards, color coded by subject. (For her NEW HOPE novel, she chose the categories "Present," "Flashback" and "Supernatural Influence.") Once she has about 200 cards, she lays them out on the floor and arranges them to construct the story line. At this point, you can transcribe the plot onto a computer file, or just take the cards that pertain to the scene you're writing and tape them up near your PC. Keep the rest bound, in order, with rubber bands. Once a scene is finished, throw that batch of cards away.

Another technique involves using one large index card for

each chapter. It should include 1) a list of characters who appear in the chapter; 2) the date, time, day and season when it takes place; 3) the setting; 4) the action; 5) the conflict; 6) the internal reaction to the conflict; 7) the external reaction, and 8) the outcome.

Just File It

Good facts make for great fiction, including "speculative" fiction. Even novelists who write what they know eventually have to do research. These days, you can find much background information on the Web, and simply paste it into a computer file. For printouts, or more conventional clippings, you can create file folders labeled by subject.

I create a least one for "Characters," sometimes giving each major character a folder and filing all the minor ones together. My file for "Locales" includes maps, photos and descriptions of key places. "Plot" holds news stories, etc., that suggest good twists, and "Props" may feature vehicles, weapons or rare artifacts that play important roles. Each novel usually requires a few of its own subcategories, as well, such as "Wicca" or "Vampirism."

Character charts, most important for the major players, can be kept on your computer or printed out and put in a file. You should list the names of all your characters, and possible keep a separate file of "good names" for future use.

Bound for Glory

An alternative to the file folder system might be a large, three-ring binder complete with tabbed dividers and a few of those plastic, self-sealing sleeves. Label the tabs the way you would file folders. The binder can hold any notes that you write or print out on letter-sized paper (punch holes where necessary), and old-sized notes and clippings can go in the sleeves. If you like visual inspiration, tape or glue photos of locales and magazine clippings of character types to the pages.

Hi-Tech Organization

Finally if you prefer to do everything on your computer, get software to make your organizing job easier.

One program that seems to attract high praise is "Writer's Blocks" from Ashley Software. The various elements of your story go into moveable text blocks that function much like electronic file cards. You can even make the blocks different colors for different subcategories. Although you may find it discounted online, the standard price is \$149.

Other software packages, such as "Writer's Deskbook V1.2.0" from Grim Software, can be downloaded free or very inexpensively, but may not have as many nifty functions.

Seize the Moment!

Whatever methods they use to organize their material,

successful novelists agree on one things--you should carry a small notebook with you at all times. Okay, if you're in the shower, you may have to write on the tile with a bar of soap. Just make sure you transfer your notes to a file card as soon as you dry off. You don't want that great idea to go down the drain!

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