Tips for Keeping Track of Vital Information in Your Novel

By

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Let's face it, write a novel, and you need to find a reliable method of keeping track of informational details. Write a fantasy trilogy (as I am doing), and suddenly you need to keep track of everything in the last two books, plus the third one you're working on. Imagine yourself in the fifth chapter of the last book, inserting character information that contradicts what you already said in book one! Maybe it's only an eye color shift, but maybe it's a shift in religious beliefs or suddenly your heroine becomes an orphan, though earlier she had a mother and a father.

And certainly, your copy editor or editor may catch it, but you might also embarrass yourself if the inconsistency gets overlooked. And trust me, a fan will find it. Or a reviewer. And then you'll hear about it in a way that could damage your sales. On the other hand, if you're a beginning writer, you might lose a chance at a sale because you're too sloppy. And even worse, from the creative standpoint, you will have built your plot on flawed premises that may result in having to gut your manuscript and rebuild. Better to keep track as you go.

Things important for me to track include page and chapter reference locations, historical background, changes I made that might need to be dealt with elsewhere, and obviously extensive notes on characters—names, appearances, habits, background and

motivations. And I want to do all this efficiently. I wrote my first novel, <u>Path of Fate</u>, with an embarrassing lack of organization, and spent an unreasonable amount of time searching through the various chapters to guarantee continuity, to find out if previous information contradicted what I wanted to add, etc. But I could afford the time. I didn't have a contract, and so I had time to waste. But not any more. When <u>Path of Fate</u> sold and I was given a deadline for <u>Path of Honor</u>, I had to find a better way. And so I've learned to be more organized and efficient so that I can devote more time to writing.

So what are some common ways to keep track of information?

1. the accounting tapes: This one was suggested to me by a former writing teacher. She would take the three-inch wide calculator tape and hang it in strips along her wall. She would then make notes on the tapes so that she could have that information in front of her at all times.

2. the index cards: Along the same lines as the accounting tape, a writer takes notes on the index cards, storing them in a box so that they can be quickly sorted through.

3. the butcher paper: Hang a long strip of butcher paper on the wall and make notes (again, much like the process of the accounting tapes and index cards).

4. notebook/journal: write the information down as it comes to you and flip through

    pages to find what you need when you need it, using sticky tabs to speed your

    search.

5. the appendix: keep an alphabetized list in a separate computer file. Insert the

    information and then scroll down, following the alphabetization, or do a search to

    locate appropriate information

6. database: create a database of information

The purpose of keeping track of this information is to maintain continuity and keep your plotline flowing. However, if you're like me, you want to spend as little time as possible doing the bookkeeping.

I have tried 1-4 above and found a number of problems. First, those lists are time and work intensive. You're rewriting by hand what you already typed. You have to rearrange and reorganize (by moving stuff on the wall or taping on extra accounting tape, etc.) when you add new information. The entire thing can become a mess when you want to change information—you begin scribbling out and trying to use post-it notes to bandage the damage. The notebook means that you have to flip pages until you find things, and maybe you didn't put what you're looking for in one place, which means you could overlook important details.

The appendix is a good idea, but to me, more work than I want to do in scrolling and finding. Appendices could be 50 pages long easily (think of incorporating that 50

pages in note cards, notebooks, butcher paper or accounting tape—my hand is cramping just thinking about it). The database is better still, but for me, the learning curve is too high, and then I don't own a database program.

I want something simple, that I can use now, that I can cut and paste from, and that is organized. What I want to do is <u>write</u>. I want to use my word processing program, which I already know inside and out, and I want to be able to insert and find information fast.

A better solution to any of the above is setting up a list in your word processing program, using a table of contents internally hyperlinked to your data, so that you can access all the information with just few keystrokes and minimal wasted time. This system also allows for the equally quick input of new information.

Creating your page

The following instructions are based upon Microsoft Word 2000.

Begin by opening up a new document. Hit the return key about 10 times so that you have some space to work with. Put your cursor on the top line of the document and type the word top. On the third line, insert a table. I like a four or five column table. I use only one row so that I don't have to keep tabbing cells when I insert information. But you could do a separate cell for each of your entries with no problem. I also prefer to remove the borders, for no other reason than they annoy me. This can be done from your toolbar, or under the Format tab. You scroll down to Borders and Shading, and click on the no borders tab.

This table is going to focus only on characters—but can be organized with any information you wish. First, I type a list of character names in the columns. I prefer to go alphabetically, but it may be that you want a column of primary character male names, primary character female names, secondary character names, non-human names, etc. The organizing principle is your choice. The main thing is to make each column useful to you. This table will serve as your table of contents.

Now for each of those names you need to repeat them in the body of the document, though not necessarily in the same order. So for me, four names would be Kebonsat, Metyein, Reisil and Saljane. In between each name, you might wish to put a page break so that you have a visible line separating each character, but it isn't necessary. But between each person, write the word top. Like so:

Kebonsat

top

Metyein

top

Reisil

top

Saljane

top

Now go back to the word "top" that you typed at above your table at the beginning of your document. Click on the word and then go to the insert menu and scroll

down to bookmark. The dialog box will ask for the bookmark's name. Call it <u>top</u> and then click add. Now go through each of the names on the list in the body of your document (not in the table but below) and do the same thing, assigning each the name that appears in the document. What you're doing is marking the location of each informational entry.

Next you will hyperlink the matching entry in your table of contents to your informational entry so that when you click on a name in your table of contents, it will take you to your entry.

To hyperlink your table of contents, go back to your table. Every name in your table should match a name below in the body of your document. What you want to be able to do is click on the name in the table of contents and be automatically switched to the appropriate location in the document—as any hyperlink works in any webpage.

Right click the name and select hyperlink, or insert the cursor in the name and go to the Insert menu and scroll down to hyperlink. You'll get a dialog box. On the left will be a list of options under the heading of "Link To." Click on the "place in this document" tab. As you do, in the main window you'll see a list that begins "top of document" followed by "headings" then "bookmarks." Listed under bookmarks will be all the bookmarks that you have placed in the document. Scroll down to the bookmark with the appropriate name, highlight it and click okay. Now you'll see that that name in your table of contents is underlined and highlighted in blue. If you click on it, you'll be taken to the associated bookmark in your document.

Repeat the process for all the names in your table of contents. Once that is done, scroll down through the body of your document where you have listed all your names,

and repeat the process for the word top. Right click and choose hyperlink and then select

top as the reference point. This will enable you to return to your main menu with a click

of the mouse—saving you scrolling back and forth.

Now all that is left for you to do is to insert your character information. I like to

keep my characters document open as I work and toggle between the current chapter and

the character list to copy and paste descriptions—avoiding the laborious copying process

of note cards, accounting tape or butcher paper. I also tend to keep more complete notes

since I don't have to copy by hand. I also include chapter and page number references.

Even if those should change as your revise, you'll have narrowed the location greatly.

Keeping the document open also allows me to look up information on my

characters as needed, with just a click of the mouse. The document is very fluid, and so

it's easy to add characters to your menu as you introduce them in your novel, repeating

the book marking process. You add names the same way you would insert information

into any word document (as this really is). To add information to the rest of the

document, you simply work with paragraphs and returns as you would any other word

document.

This process is simple and efficient. By using this tracking method, you merely

need to go to your table of contents and click on a characters' name to have all your

information available to you. This process is equally useful for organizing information

about places, politics, and timelines. And best of all, it only takes a few minutes to set

up the document, so you are swiftly on your way.