

The BIG ‘BANG’ approach

4 steps to take you from idea to completion on every writing project

By Jill Dearman

SEVERAL YEARS ago, I attended a Torah class in New York City, where the steps in the “creation of the universe” were likened to a mystically infused combination of four Hebrew letters: Yud, Hei, Vav, Hei. The rabbi discussed how these steps were not so different from the steps in an artist’s creative process. Consider: Yud = the spark of an idea, Hei = the idea’s concrete development or form, Vav = the artist’s emotional hook or connection to the creation, and the final Hei = its completion.

In my “Bang the Keys” writing workshops, I have adapted these steps into an acronym (and a philosophy) that encapsulates the process every writer must go through on every writing project: B = Begin; A = Arrange; N = Nurture; G = (let it) Go—BANG.

Remember, when your mind wanders or your heart strays, the solution is always the same: BANG the Keys!

1 Begin. Grand expectations of immediate, fabulous writing often stop us from just sitting down to type. In our lives outside writing, we tolerate messiness. When we are in school or at work and have to come up with an idea for a paper or presentation, we do. Why? Because we have to. Instead of aiming for perfection, try brainstorming or freewriting or some com-

bination of the two. But when? How?

“Beginning is the hardest,” says novelist Aaron Krach, author of *Half-Life*. “There is laundry to do, dishes to wash, and oh, that new DVD from Netflix came today. ... There are just so many reasons not to start a project. And yet, it is not ever, never ever going anywhere if it isn’t started. So I force myself to start. Usually in the morning. Coffee, nothing else. Just me and the computer for 60 minutes. If that’s all I can do the first day, fine. But I gotta do all 60 minutes.”

Matthew Howe, horror writer and author of the memoir *Film Is Hell*, due out this month, adds, “When you force yourself to write every day, you become a writer. You train your brain to take little things you see during the day, or little ideas that flit through your head, and turn them into stories. Often, little scraps or snippets you’ve produced as exercises will become parts of new stories later down the road.”

For those who can’t do daily, try every other day. Can’t do an hour? Do 20 minutes. Or pull a Graham Greene and try for 500 words. Do that three times a week and your grand idea will have the time and space to emerge.

2 Arrange into a concrete shape and form. Once the idea is clear, the next challenge is to find the proper form to hold it. Is it a screenplay or a novel? A memoir or an essay? Short story or haiku? And once you have settled that question, what will

the structure be?

“This fall I was working on a new theater piece, and gearing up for a reading with actors,” my client Aaron Landsman recalled. “At a certain point, the director I was working with said, ‘I think you want this to fit your idea of what a “play” is, and I think that’s holding you back.’ He reminded me that I was limiting the work before it had a chance to really find its style, rhythm and form.”

“This was two days before the reading, so I went home, panicked appropriately, and wrote and rewrote for about

WORKOUT

DID SOMEONE SAY they needed help? That’s a step! And here are exercises for each step of the “BANG the Keys” method:

1. Begin. You’re going to use a meditation approach to try to find and frame the seed of a new story, or to jump-start your writing if you’ve hit a lull with your existing idea. This approach can help you focus and keep your mind from jumping about.

Begin by mentally “channel-surfing” for story ideas using the “5 Ws” of journalism. If you have too many ideas and don’t know which is the right one, try this guided, repetitive meditation: While you breathe normally, with eyes closed

26 of the next 30 hours. By the time my deadline for the reading came, it had become three short plays with the same characters. Each functioned independently, and ran about 15 minutes. Together they functioned like a book of linked stories; they accumulated into something larger than the sum of their parts. The lesson? Let the work speak to you once the first draft's done; it will tell you what the form is supposed to be."

My client Robin Gaines, a former journalist who has an agent shopping her novel-in-stories, adds, "Arranging the material is the hardest aspect of writing for me. Once I know the general beginning and the end, I just let the characters figure out how they're going to get themselves out of the jams I've put in front of them. Start arranging your notes when you get excited about characters and potential story lines. Let the material stew in your head, and refrain from putting too many boundaries up. The cream of what you're dreaming will rise to the top."

3 Nurture your project with love so that others may love it, too. As writers, so much of our time is spent wishing for love from the external world—readers, friends, agents, editors—that we treat our projects as coldly as we fear the world will.

That is why this step is so important. Once you have begun a project and found a working form, don't take it for granted. Delving deeper into its crevices and engaging on a more emotional level with your characters is essential.

One of the biggest issues I deal with from my clients is the "So what?" factor. The idea is good. Check! The form is clever or classic. Check! But so what? What the reader needs is emotional and mental engagement with the work—exactly what writers must conjure up during the writing process.

Think of your writing project as a significant other, or a close friend. Nurture the relationship by spending time with it, and asking *it* to reveal itself to you. On a first date, or a first writing session, you are probably able to ask a lot of questions—both whimsical and deep. From "Who's your favorite cartoon character?" to "What was the greatest struggle you ever faced?" Toss those questions at your characters, and write down what they say.

"I write and edit and write and edit until the story makes me laugh and cry, and it's the book I would want to read," Gaines adds. "I'm meticulous about voice. If the character doesn't sound real in every sense of the word, I keep rewriting until he or she is either killed off or becomes completely alive."

4 Go! Finish and let it go ... out into the world. There's a Billy Joel song I listen to when I am trying to write but feel a little disconnected. I only pull it out once in a very long while because it immediately makes me sob uncontrollably! It's called "Famous Last Words," and in it he sings about how hard it is to say goodbye. To let anything go, in this impermanent world, is a little scary; it's very human to want to hold on. Letting go can make us feel more existentially alone, at sea.

"My best advice here is: Create deadlines, and if you need it, get help," says short-story writer and creativity coach Deborah Atherton. "I write eight hours a day for my job, then come home and write at nights and on weekends; with all that volume, I need all the help I can get. Copy editors, submission services, my beloved workshop—I've used them all, and they have all helped. There's a myth that a writer has to be a lone wolf, a lonely artist, a voice in the wilderness—well, it's not true. Accept the help your friends offer, join workshops, take classes, hire help if you need it. It's not easy being a writer! You deserve it!"

Jill Dearman

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and an open mind, take each idea in turn and gently tap each of your fingers on your knees to help you focus and keep out random thoughts. During the first 10 taps, silently repeat "Who?" in your mind. Do another round of tapping, this time using the next "W"—"What?" Follow with rounds of "Where?" "When?" and "Why?" Then, write a brief synopsis of your story, using the snippets of images, character, dialogue and whatever else floated through your mind.

2. Arrange.

- Problems are at the heart of every narrative (and every life), so identify your characters' objectives.
- Now write down the most natural-feel-

ing beginning, middle and end of your story. Just a sentence for each.

- Write down 10 potential obstacles facing a character (the first that come to mind) between the beginning and middle of the story, and the middle and end. It could be something as simple as his car won't start and he'll be late to a meeting, or, more ominously, his wife telling him, "We need to talk."
- Polish and pare down to 12 sentences—a nice frame to get started with.

3. Nurture. Imagine the spirit of your character hovering over your desk as you write. She tells you, "Yes, you know me very well, better than my best friend, my spouse, my shrink! *But* there's something

you're still missing about me. ..." Let your character speak in the "I" voice and tell you what you still don't see. Do five minutes of freewriting (no pauses to think!) or 500 words, whichever comes first.

4. Go. Imagine the beginning of your *next* story (whatever form) embedded in the ending of this one. Write a scene that feels like an ending, but in the back of your mind, think of it as a beginning, too. For example, a college student says goodbye to his family at the end of his holiday visit, but perhaps that goodbye is really the opening of the story about his next semester in school, when a life-changing event takes place.

—J.D.