

**ACFW ONLINE CLASS "PLANNING A BOOK"**  
**ROXANNE RUSTAND**  
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**LESSON #5**  
**ROADMAPS AND RECORDS---HOW TO SAVE YOU FROM A MIGRAINE!**

This part was meant to be the second half of Lesson #4...until the length grew too long for posting on an e-mail digest. It's about keeping records---The Bookkeeping Approach to Maintaining Your Mental Health. Doesn't that sound exciting? Maybe not. But believe me, if I didn't use the following tools, I never could have kept up with some very tight deadlines. And even the books written under more relaxed deadlines could have ended up in Revision Nightmare!

So here we go, with the four tools that make my life easier...followed by the five secrets I promised to share. ☺

Please note that there are examples of these tools on my website ([www.roxannerustand.com](http://www.roxannerustand.com) under "Articles.") On the articles page, the lessons and most of the handouts are on the top half of that page. Page down to find the rest of the handouts. They were posted for a previous class, and thus they are down toward the bottom. It would not be possible to preserve the formatting in the worksheets if I tried to post them to the ACFW loop.

**1. ARC COPY**

I keep a working ARC of every chapter in a ring notebook, right by my keyboard.

An "ARC" is a document formatted to look like a novel that you're holding open in your hands. This format condenses the big Courier 12-point, double-spaced text into a version where you can see several pages at a glance.

As soon as I finish a chapter, I rename and save it as an ARC, format it, then put it into my notebook. On these pages, I'll circle problems, draw arrows, write copious reminders and add comments--so later, when the book is done, I can go through and fix everything at once (barring really substantial problems that must be fixed before the story can be continued.)

This tool makes it easier to catch repetitions, errors and inconsistencies, because the text is condensed. It's easier to skim the entire story, if I'm concerned about the balance or progress of the romance, suspense or faith elements. I may even go through and highlight pertinent paragraphs with pink, blue and/or orange, so I can visually evaluate the balance and distribution of those aspects. Or, I may change the font colors and print off copies with my color ink jet printer instead of the laser.

Formatting this is simple.

Save the chapter under a different name, such as "Chap 3-arc", then....

1. change to "Landscape" instead of "Portrait"
2. single space, and set columns to "two"
3. Times New Roman 11 point
4. 1 inch margins on the sides and bottom, 1.2 on the top
5. widows and orphans off

## 2. "SUBPLOT TRACKER"

Don't let subplots fade away and forget about them. Editors and readers really notice these things! Subplots should each have their own arc, and be tied up, one by one, at the end of the book. It's better to tie off the more minor subplots first, then end the main external plot, and finally, reach the final point of the romance, if you are writing a romance or a romantic suspense. Wrap up the most intense, gripping, or just plain interesting subplots end closest to the end, so that the reader is kept madly turning the pages.

But how on earth can you keep juggling your subplots, make sure you stay on track, and not forget one or two? I simply can't do it without help.

And what if you sell your manuscript, and are suddenly faced with revisions--and now need to find out exactly "what you put where" in your huge manuscript?! I cannot count the people I know who have had to "gut a book" and nearly start from scratch after major revision requests, and that can be quite a process!

Even lighter revisions can be a real challenge. Just think about it...if you change something about a subplot or character---that element may have octopus tentacles throughout your entire book...and if you don't catch all of those references, readers will notice!

The Subplot Tracker helps me with all of the above. And so far, it has saved me from heavy revisions--because I've already made sure every element is there and in place. And for the revisions I do have, I can easily find the right scenes and make the changes.

I don't fill in this tracker ahead of time, by the way. I fill it out as I finish each chapter. It helps me keep chronological events and character development straight, make sure that the romance is progressing, ensure that the suspense is heating up, and that the stakes are getting higher. Also, if I notice that a certain column is blank for several chapters, it alerts me to the fact that I'm losing one of my subplots.

I also use this form to write myself notes for the future. I'll usually put them in red italics--reminders that some event needs to take place in a future chapter.

## 3. MY SCENE-SEQUEL STANDBY

I mostly just use the subplot tracker now, but I used the "Scene-sequel" tool for years. Again, it isn't filled out ahead for planning (though I guess you could!)

It's a way to keep track of the external plot events, and how each affects the characters' goals, motivations, conflict and romance. Which is useful, because if the story events *don't* affect those elements, most readers probably aren't going to care about the story.

## 4. CALENDAR

You might think that the tools above are more than enough. And certainly, one can put days of the week and dates on the subplot tracker. But a calendar is a great tool as well....to ensure that all of the chronology is on target, and it is also a handy snapshot of the story. Take a look at the calendar example, and you'll see what I mean. I keep one of these on the bulletin board above my computer with every single book...a habit started after my editor found and questioned date inconsistencies in my first few books. It was sooo hard to find and correct those references, which were sometimes hidden in a bit of thought or dialogue, vaguely referring to a specific passage of time. A calendar keeps everything straight!

**And finally....my FIVE BIG SECRETS ☺ ...that aren't really secrets after all.****1.. DON'T STOP! Get that manuscript done!!!**

Are you working on your first, or one of your first manuscripts? MY KEY ADVICE--KEEP MOVING!

I know too many people who barely get to Chapter 3 before they start to falter...and then come to a halt.

Maybe it's because they can't figure out how to get past the vast wasteland of despair in that interminable mid-section of their book (how I felt anyway, with my first manuscript!) where it gets harder to "keep things moving." Maybe they are driven to polish, polish, polish each word, needing perfection before they can move on. Maybe they've received a lot of feedback from critique friends or contests, and feel they have to incorporate all of that before they can continue. There are all too many wonderful writers out there who will never finish a book, because they are so caught up in the endless cycle of critiquing and fixing.

Critique groups can be great. Contests are wonderful. Just don't keep fixing the same first three chapters, trying to please everyone. Not only will you fail to make forward progress, but you'll risk getting so tired of the project that you just give it up. And, while you're spinning your wheels, trying to incorporate every last comment, you might be diluting your voice instead of strengthening it.

Again: Unless there are serious issues that need to be fixed before you can move ahead with a good, strong story, file comments away to be used after you finish the book, and KEEP ROLLING.

I worked (piddled, is more like it!) on my first story for over a year, and had around 127 pages completed when I took a class at the Iowa Summer Writer's Festival. A multi-published genre author taught that class, and in addition to hearing her lectures, we critiqued each other's work as a group. The teacher AND all twelve students from around the world were unanimous: the first 75 pages of my manuscript had to go. Ouch. I was depressed for weeks! But they were right...and I had wasted endless hours polishing pages that didn't even work. Once I cut all of that superfluous backstory at the beginning, the story started where it needed to start.

So take a lesson from my experience and save your polishing and perfecting until your story is done.

If you don't ever reach The End, you will not learn the incredible lessons such a feat offers you-- the lessons on how to keep a story moving. You won't feel the joy of typing that very last page. or gain the confidence created by finishing that final word. If you don't get there, you won't have a book to revise, polish, and submit.

And if you can't do that, you can't sell a book.

Yes, of course you have to revise and polish your completed manuscript until it shines before you submit it to an editor or agent. They are not in the critique business. They don't have time to turn a lump of coal into a sparkling diamond that will spur a bidding war between publishers. It needs to be salable when it reaches their desk.

Though, just as an aside: if your manuscript sells, be prepared! Your beautifully polished first manuscript won't be published "As-is" unless you sell to a vanity publisher. Your new editor may require LOTS of substantial changes at the revision, line edit, and copy edits stages, before the book is printed. A friend who sold a suspense to a major New York secular publisher said later that not four words were strung together the same way, after she went through three substantial revisions. That book, by the way, ended up as a best seller.

**2. SAVE A FRESH READER!** Are you in a critique group? They can be excellent, true. I meet with my group when I can, though mostly just for the brainstorming aspect. But if you are meeting regularly and critiquing chapter by chapter, something can happen. Once everyone has seen your manuscript over and over, they will no longer have the same ability to catch small problems. They may subconsciously *expect* certain details to be there and not notice if those details have disappeared during one of your revisions. And, they might not be able to clearly see some of the larger problems, because they've gotten too close to the story. Save one astute friend--maybe someone who isn't even in your critique group. Offer to give her own manuscript a straight-through, fresh read...and ask her to do that for you as well. You'll be amazed at what a fresh reader can find!

If you don't have someone like this amongst your friends, here's another idea: when you finish your manuscript, set it aside for several months. Don't even peek. Then give it a fresh read yourself. Again--you'll be amazed at what a fresh read will turn up! In an old LaVyrle Spencer RWA workshop tape, she said she would set each of her manuscripts aside in that way, to "age like fine wine," she said, tongue in cheek. And then she'd catch an amazing number of plot holes and other errors.

**3. This hint is pure gold. READ EVERYTHING ALOUD. AND, use the "Text to Speech" feature in your Mac or PC.** Reading your manuscript aloud--every single page--is an excellent way to ferret out long, boring narrative passages, clunky or silly dialogue, sing-song or repetitious sentences, and awkward phrasing. Yes--it takes a lot of time. But if you just sit and read silently, I can guarantee that you'll start to skim, then skip, and your mind will probably start to wander. But read aloud, and you can't do that. You will improve your writing more than you can image.

It can also be extremely useful to use the "Text to Speech" function that comes with every newer PC and Mac. You can choose the voice type and the speed. Hearing the words spoken give you another shot at perfecting your work.

I like to print off a hard copy that I follow as I listen to "Alex" read a chapter. I can quickly circle problem spots and keep up with him. If I try to type in corrections on the screen while he talks, however, I get left behind. Alex and I have become good friends. <g>

**4. If a scene isn't working, switch it into another character's POV (point of view.) Or, read it aloud while switching into first person POV as you read.** The switch from "third person POV" to "first person POV" would change the sentence: "Bill walked outside" to "I walked outside."

Doing so can help you isolate problems in POV, and also help point out where the scene is going wrong.

What POV should you be in? The common thought is that it should be the character with the most to lose or gain in the scene. However, that isn't always right. Years ago, award-winning author Laura Kinsale said in a workshop that it's sometimes stronger to be in the POV of the person who is *with* the one who is experiencing the most angst. The observer can see the body language, expression, tension, and obvious pain or fear or uncertainty. And, it might be more sympathetic that way--for example, if someone is observing your rough, tough hero facing trouble, while he is clearly trying to rein in his emotions.

**5. Finally....how can you make yourself keep going?!**

It's so hard, some days. The words won't come and the whole book seems like drivel. Maybe you need to take a long walk, or fill your creative well by watching a movie, or taking off some hours to read an author you love. Or maybe, one last little tool will help. Remember those United Way thermometer-type graphs that show the level of donations? Make one of them--easy with the "table" function on your computer--with ten-page increments marked up one side, capping with your expected total word count. You can then mark off little squares with each ten pages you finish, and see your progress climbing up the

graph. Perhaps it will even be motivation to write a few minutes longer, so you can mark off one more square!

Well....this is the end of "Planning a Book." I hope you've found some useful nuggets in the class, or perhaps a useful tool to try among the handouts that I've posted. There's one last resource to mention: a survey I did with inspirational romantic suspense authors, which became a six-page handout for a 2009 RWA Conference workshop. If this is an area of writing that you're interested in, you can download the handout from the articles page at my website.

During the remaining days in February, I would love to answer questions (if I can!) and hear feedback from you about any parts of this class that you found useful. And if you'd like more explanations about something, I'll be happy to respond here on the loop.

If you'd like to talk further, after the class, please feel free to stop by my blog at <http://roxannerustand.blogspot.com>. I love to have guest bloggers there, by the way, so let me know if you'd like to blog about your pets! Finally, I have a free (and very infrequent) e-newsletter, if you're interested. The little sign up button is easy, and it's on the upper right hand corner of my website pages.

Wishing you great success with your writing!

Roxanne Rustand  
www.roxannerustand.com